

Collaborating with Local Community to Improve Water Environment

— Activities of JEN, NGO Supporting Syrian Refugees in Jordan —



Mr. Sasaki gives an explanation alongside Minister for Foreign Affairs Fumio Kishida, who is observing the Zaatari Refugee Camp. (Photo: JEN)

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The Syrian situation started to deteriorate rapidly in March 2011. One destination for the many people fleeing that fierce conflict has been the neighboring country of Jordan. In July 2012, the Jordanian Government established the Zaatari Refugee Camp along the border with Syria. As of August 2013, a total of approximately 130,000 people are living in this camp.

The refugee camp is being run not only by the Jordanian Government but also by supporting organizations including international aid agencies, relief teams from foreign governments, and NGOs. One such NGO is the Japan Emergency NGO (JEN), which is headquartered in Japan.

“The foremost activity of JEN is thorough surveys on what refugees need. Here at the Zaatari Refugee Camp too, we have been working with other groups and going door to door in the camp for surveys. Through that process, we have realized that there is an urgent need for the distribution of winter clothes and the improvement of the water environment.”

This comment comes from Mr. Hiroshi Sasaki, who is leading JEN activities within the camp. Born in 1985, Mr. Sasaki spent his childhood in Indonesia. He was in primary school in 1998 when the dictatorship fell. In the ensuing chaos that followed in Jakarta, robbery and violence were common occurrences, and Mr. Sasaki was able to see with his own eyes the reality of the poverty turning his peers of the same generation into street children. He continued to question the fundamental causes of these problems after returning to Japan, eventually choosing to study Development Economics in Graduate School. He took a job with JEN because he felt on a daily basis that it was the international NGO working closest to source of international problems. He was subsequently dispatched to Jordan in September 2012.

Mr. Sasaki is in charge of support at the Zaatari Refugee Camp. JEN started emergency support for Syrian refugees in September 2012, and built 21 washing areas in the camp through a Japan Platform (JPF)* project aimed at creating an environment in which women could wash hygienically and free from fear and anxiety. That said, refugee camps are makeshift communities. Refugees do not have a strong sense of community, and so once common properties like washing areas, water stations or toilets break or become dirty, they often

remain that way without being repaired or cleaned, eventually becoming unusable. This of course worsens the water environment and increases the health risks faced by refugees.

Mr. Sasaki and the other members of JEN partnered with UNICEF and called upon the residents of each camp neighborhood to form Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) committees. This process also had the aim of increasing the community spirit of residents around the shared theme of water.

“We hoped that we would receive the participation of enthusiastic volunteers. We encouraged voluntary action by people who could feel the need for the improvement of the water environment, such as parents with children suffering from diarrhea.”

The calls of JEN slowly permeated the camp, and the Committee members, having the mindset to govern their own environment, pooled their money to purchase cleaning equipment and assigned shifts for toilet cleaning. Requests had previously been submitted to supporting organizations to fix pipes, but now the camp started to see the emergence of people asking only to borrow tools so that they could fix the pipes themselves. JEN supported these resident-led activities and worked with Committee members to increase awareness about the sanitation. As a result of these accumulated efforts, the prevalence of waterborne illness among the sick dropped from 10% to 5%. Through visits to households in order to directly hear the opinions of residents, the people of the camp also came to understand more about JEN as a Japanese NGO.

Through the JEN's support, a total of 191 WASH Committees have been set up in the camp. The group is being praised highly from other international organizations for its contribution to the foundations of resident self-governance. The decision has been made to divide the camp into 12 administrative divisions, and JEN has been selected alongside aid organizations from Europe and the United States as one of four groups that will support self-governance.

The world is paying close attention to the situation in this refugee camp, where JEN has produced steady results. Mr. Sasaki, who is responsible for the operations in the camp, had the following message for the people of Japan.

“Our days are those of continued failure and regret. But unless we challenge, we can never know what is correct and what is not. Those who have the courage to take the first step will surely come close to their goals. So no matter what you are aiming for, never give up. I work every day in the belief that peace will return to Syria, the people of this camp will return to their homeland, and the administrative activities taking place in this camp will prove useful for the rebuilding of Syria.”



WASH committee members during an informal meeting at a washroom facility. (Photo: JEN)

* Japan Platform (JPF) is an organization (a non-profit organization) set up by NGOs, business community, and the Japanese government with the aim of enabling Japanese NGOs to carry out speedy and effective emergency humanitarian assistance for those effected by conflict or natural disasters. It was established in August 2000.