

Increasing Public Bond with the Self-Defense Force

By FUNADA Hajime

When I visited a Japan Ground Self-Defense Force (JGSDF) base located in my constituency the other day, I had an opportunity to talk to SDF officers, who provided me with a new perspective on SDF. After the March 11th earthquake, SDF was deployed in the affected areas for about 4 months, during which time they conducted demanding operations under difficult circumstances. Their operations involved emergency road maintenance, clearing rubbles, searching for missing people and searching for dead bodies. Unfortunately, most of their activities were not reported by the media and the officers showed reticence about discussing the operations conducted by their troops.

During our conversation, the officers emphasized the importance of mental healthcare for SDF soldiers. They said that, upon arrival at the affected areas, the soldiers could not help being overwhelmed by the sheer scale of damage. Yet, as soon as they started relief operations, their motivation was strengthened asking themselves, "If we don't, who would?" This state of highly motivated psychology continues even after returning to the base, but then their state of psychology starts going down, with some of them experiencing even some sort of depression. This kind of emotional transition is a natural human reaction, though SDF soldiers, who have been trained to control their emotions, know better how to make such a transition more under control. However, even they are concerned about the emotional transition they experienced in the relief operations in the affected areas. This tells how severe were the situations in affected areas.

SDF maintains that the necessary mental healthcare for SDF soldiers could be taken care of by SDF's own medical staff for the time being. However, it is my ardent hope that, should there be any need for outside support, SDF would not hesitate to tell us so. I conveyed this message to the officers concerned of SDF. It was impressive to see them talking about their experiences in a calm manner without losing control of their emotions. While this is appreciated, it should not be forgotten that they are also human beings. They should be encouraged to talk more candidly about their experiences. We need to help each other in need.

Another point I would like to mention is the gratitude, which people of the affected areas

felt to SDF soldiers. When SDF completed their missions in the affected areas, people of the affected areas wished to organise farewell and/or thank-you parties in order to convey their gratitude to SDF soldiers. But it is said that SDF soldiers refrained themselves from attending such parties in compliance with instructions from above. SDF soldiers might have thought that they simply did what they should have done. But what they did is more than anything we could thank for. We, who live near SDF bases, could have also organized such gatherings as people in the affected areas wanted to organize. In comparison with the past, the distance between SDF and society has been narrowed so much, but it seems that there still remains some uneasiness between them as illustrated by the reluctance of the media to cover activities of SDF. If we, the people of Japan, need SDF, we should perhaps embrace them more wholeheartedly.

(This is the English translation of an article written by FUNADA Hajime, former Director-General of Economic Planning Agency, which originally appeared on the BBS "Hyakka-Seiho" of JFIR on December 7, 2011.)