

INTERVIEW OF PROFESSOR SABURO TAKIZAWA

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PROFILE OF INTERVIEWEE

Saburo Takizawa, Professor at Toyo Eiwa University was born in Nagano prefecture. He graduated from Saitama University in 1972. He completed a doctoral program at Tokyo Metropolitan University. He joined the Ministry of Justice in Japan in 1976, and then received an MBA from the Graduate School of Business at the University of California Berkeley. He is a Certified Public Accountant (CPA) of America. In 1981, he joined the United Nations Office in Geneva, and then worked for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA). He held prominent positions such as Director of Program Coordination the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) and Controller and Director at the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), headquarters in Geneva. He was appointed as the first Japanese UNCHR Representative in Japan from January 2007 to August 2008. Since April 2009 he has been in his present post as a professor at Toyo Eiwa Jogakuin University. He also has taught at the University of Tokyo since October 2009. His favorite word is 'challenge.'

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Q1. What triggered of your involvement in refugee issues? Please tell me about your previous and current involvement in refugee issues.

After joining the Ministry of Justice in 1976, I was first assigned to work in the Immigration Bureau. It was the time when refugees from Indochina area started arriving in Japan as 'boat people'. Then, while working in the United Nations (hereafter U.N.) for 28 years, I was in the organization called UNRWA for nine years and in the UNHCR for around six years. Half of my career in the U.N. was related to refugee issues.

My professional background is finance and accounting, so it is in a sense by accident that I started working with refugees. However, I studied hard on the issue while working in the UNRWA and the UNHCR. Especially, being the Japanese citizen myself, in the UNHCR, I was particularly interested in the refugee protection in Japan. I volunteered to be the UNHCR representative in Japan about two years before my retirement. Refugee issues have significant meaning not only to refugees themselves but also to societies which accept refugees. After my retirement from the U.N., I continue working on refugee protection and their social integration in Japan. This is my life-work.

Q2. How would you evaluate Japan's refugee policies?

In recent years Japan's refugee policies have become a lot better. For example, the Japanese government revised the Immigration Control and Refugee Recognition Law in 2004 and this revision established the refugee examination counselor (nanmin sanyoin seido) system. After the revision, the number of asylum seekers in Japan has been notably increasing.

In addition, the Japanese government launched a three-year pilot program beginning in 2010 to resettle 30 Burmese refugees each year for three years from a camp in Thailand. Many Japanese came to pay attention towards refugee issues through NGO movements and the media reporting. Japan has been criticized as being a 'passive refugee accepting country' within international communities for a long time. However, now the government has opened its heavy door narrowly for refugees. We need to continue to open the door wider.

Q3. It is widely said that you played a significant role in the process by which the Japanese government decided to launch the resettlement programs for refugees in camps. What is your motivation for this?

The basic purpose was to end Japan's passive policy of accepting refugees. The launch of the resettlement program is one way to address this situation. The acceptance of convention refugees is a duty under the U.N. Refugee Convention. However, the ac-

ceptance of the resettlement refugees is not a duty but a voluntary action. Even if the acceptance number per year, 30 refugees, is quite small, this is a pivotal point at which Japan has changed its passive refugee policy to a more active one. In this moment, refugee communities in Japan are small and this situation does not encourage new asylum seekers to flee to Japan. Enlarged refugee communities through the planned resettlement program would encourage more refugees or asylum seekers to seek protection in Japanese society.

I also hope that due to the resettlement program, Japanese people will pay more attention to refugee issues around the world and open Japan's door to more refugees. In 2007 when I first addressed the launch of the resettlement program, the reaction by the Japanese government was not good. It was initially claimed that "a resettlement program which is not obligatory under the U.N. Refugee Convention is difficult because Japan does not even accept convention refugees." However, I found an opportunity to advance the issue. In recent years acceptance of 'immigrants' has been widely discussed in Japanese society because of the shrinking and aging population. I reframed the issue as accepting 'humanitarian immigrants.'

The scale of the resettlement program is 30 people per year and very small, but this will set a new agenda (of refugee issues). By receiving a fixed number of resettled refugees every year, national attention will continue to be focused on refugee issues and this will lead to the improvement of refugee policy in Japan. This will certainly have a positive impact on the acceptance and social integration of Convention refugees. Let's not forget that there are six million refugees worldwide who are confined in refugee camps and cannot by themselves find solutions to their plight. Even though the acceptance number is small, the launch of the resettlement program in Japan is an important step forward to address this 'protracted refugee situation.'

Q4. So, you had an intention of setting a new 'agenda' on refugee issues in Japan through the launch of the resettlement programs.

Yes, agenda setting is very important when we try to start things moving. Someone has to set an agenda by making statements like "there are such problems here," and say "let's make these kinds of actions" and make efforts to realize the agenda by collaborating with other people. We can use the agenda to draw public attention and discuss the agenda with the government to realize it. Japanese people are not very good at handling this strategy. However, this is a very important business skill. While I worked as the UNHCR Representative in Japan, we organized parades and walk rallies called 'Omotesando-jack' in Harajuku area in Tokyo to advocate refugee issues. Media reported our unusual event, drawing more people's attention, and this caused them to ask "What are refugee issues?"

Q5. What kind of impressions do the refugees in the camps have of Japan?

In 2007, I visited a Burmese refugee camp in the mountains of Thailand where there was no electricity at all. I asked refugees there, "Do you wish to go to Japan?" Although there were some who showed interest, unfortunately, there was no one who answered clearly, "Yes, I want to go to Japan". Some of them hardly knew about Japan. However, even those who knew about Japan had a kind of distrust of Japan. They mentioned, "Japan has been supporting the Burmese government through Official Development Assistance (ODA), although the Burmese government persecutes us." I realized that these refugees also had notions that they would not be happy by going to Japan. I understand that only a few dozen refugees showed interest in being resettled to Japan when the Japanese government officials went to a refugee camp in Thailand this February to select refugees for resettlement in Japan.

Thirty years ago, the same thing happened when Japan accepted thousands of Indo-Chinese refugees. Most Indo-Chinese refugees came to Japan because they could not go to the U.S., Canada or Australia. It is sad that few refugees wish to come to Japan. However, this does not mean that Japan does not have to do anything. We must put a full stop to the mindset that Japan is 'not a desirable place for refugees to settle'. We must change Japanese society so that more refugees wish to seek asylum in Japan. One of the reasons that refugees hesitated to come to Japan is their concern about discrimination. Discrimination against refugees has a relationship with discrimination against, and exclusion of, those who are somewhat 'different' or 'weak'. Refugee acceptance can be a chance to fix the discrimination problems remaining in Japan.

Q6. In 2009, UNHCR issued a report on the settlement of Indo-Chinese refugees in Japan. As a result of the settlement of these Indo-Chinese, what was learned about Japanese refugee policy?

One of the things revealed in the survey is that Japanese language education in the early settlement period was overwhelmingly insufficient. Although the Indochinese refugees received about four months of language training, it was by far too short. Due to lack of language skills they could only get the so-called "3K" jobs -kiken (dangerous), kitanai (dirty), and kitsui(hard), and their income level is low. They are too busy to continue to learn the Japanese because of long working hours, etc. The vicious cycle continues. At home, kids can speak Japanese but the parents often cannot, so parent-child communication is an issue. After the 4 months of training at the resettlement center, there was no more help from the UNHCR or the Japanese government. Moreover, there was little help from the local governments; it was as if one day local government officials just realized that refugees were in their city. There was no subsidy (financial support) from the central government for the local governments or NGOs to help them assist in social integration.

The social safety net, including medical insurance and social security, was not sufficient, so it was difficult for them to live independently. There also was no job training, and refugees could not utilize their skills. Many ended up as unskilled laborers. Quite a few are believed to have left Japan for other countries. So here in Japan, I would say that there is a kind of 'Protracted Refugee Situation.'

As a side note, of the 3,000 letters sent out to Indochinese Refugees for this survey, 1,500 were returned to sender. This indicates that they no longer lived at their given address. The 3,000 addresses were provided by the Refugee Assistance Headquarters (RHQ), which is a quasi-governmental organization in charge of supporting these refugees, as a representative sample, considering gender, age, nationality and so on. Though we followed up on the 1,500 letters that got through with a phone call, in the end, only 250 people gave an interview. Many people responded, "Why do you conduct a survey now?" and, "We have been surveyed several times without any improvement." We realized that over the past thirty years, the distance between the government and UNHCR on one hand, and the Indochinese refugees on the other, has widened. We must apply these lessons in the implementation of the new third country resettlement program as well as for the future acceptance and social integration of convention refugees.

Q7. After retiring from the U.N., you became a professor at Toyo Eiwa Jogakuin University and at the University of Tokyo Graduate School. What kind of topics do you teach?

At Toyo Eiwa Jogakuin University I am teaching "Theory of Refugees and Migrants," "International Organizations," "Theory of International Cooperation," "Theory of Development," and "Ethnic Issues" to mostly undergraduate students in the social science department. Each grade has about 250 students, and in any of my classes there are roughly 100 students. They are all pure students with passion. Some people might say that Toyo Eiwa Jogakuin is a wealthy girls school, and actually these young female students most of whom went to a mission school during middle and high school, come to realize how lucky they are to be raised and educated in such a privileged environment as they learn about refugee problems. They have a house, food to eat, their parents, and can buy clothes that they like. The students, surprised that the things they take for granted are not available for many people in the world, become more thankful for the blessings they have. Also, some students even say, "I want to do something to help people in need," and take action themselves. As a professor at a university, it makes me so happy to see this kind of change in young students.

In the seminar in the Human Security Program at the University of Tokyo I lead a "Theory of Refugees and Migrants" course in which we study, for instance, the migration cycle, reasons for voluntary and forced migration, migration dynamics, and issues related to integration in destination countries. Graduate students in the class are studying topics like 'Education of Refugees,' 'Refugees and Media,' and 'The Possibilities for Accepting

Refugees in Rural Areas.’ Since winter semester last year, we have made an abridged translation of *The Age of Migration*, fourth edition, by Stephen Castles. This is a big accomplishment, which will be shared with other people, inside and outside the University of Tokyo. In the future I expect that a number of researchers and practitioners who are concerned with “people on the move” will come out of this seminar.

Q8. Tell us the significance of ‘Refugee Studies’ in Japan

Japan’s passive and exclusive stance on refugees can be attributed to the absence of appropriate refugee policies. When we talk about the refugee issues in Japan, we use the term of ‘refugee policies’. However, actually, there are almost no ‘refugee (or migration) policies’ to speak of in Japan. Lack of research and researchers in refugee field is one cause for this situation. Especially in Japan, the field of refugee studies is narrowly focused on refugee status determination (RSD) issues. However, RSD is only one phase of the cycle of forced displacement of people. We need to broaden our research perspective and look at such issues as root causes of forced displacement in the countries of origin, Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), RSD, local integration in the countries of asylum and repatriation to home countries.

For instance, Japan is not a country favored by asylum seekers. Why do asylum seekers/refugees not want to come to Japan? We cannot explain it by simply saying that the Japan’s RSD process is too strict. We could learn in more depth about Japanese refugee policy and Japanese society itself through the eyes of refugees who decided not to seek asylum in Japan. This takes on significance beyond the field of “Refugee Studies”. It will take decades in order to reach an academic level like the U.S., England and Canada; countries that have accumulated knowledge and experiences on refugees and migration, but nonetheless I hope to move ‘Refugee and Migrants Studies’ in Japan forward and educate students who would become good refugee researchers and scholars in the future.

Q9. What is your current goal?

‘Research’ and ‘Action’. One action is promoting a new mechanism for local integration of refugees in local cities and towns. In April 2009, I established a citizen’s group in Matsumoto City, Nagano Prefecture to explore the possibility of inviting resettled Myanmar refugees to live there. In cooperation with HSP/CDR, we have organized symposia, charity concerts and seminars advocating for acceptance of refugees in the city. Indeed, there are thousands of foreign laborers (migrants) in Matsumoto area but no refugees. I would say the region is void of refugees. Most people might think it is impossible to accept refugees in local cities like Matsumoto, but I would like to challenge that notion. The Mayor of Matsumoto, Mr. Akira Sugeno, has been a leading member of an

international humanitarian NGO, and understands the importance of humanitarian actions. We named our initiative in Matsumoto the "Humanitarian City, Matsumoto Project". I want to see Matsumoto city become a model for "local" integration of refugees in all parts of Japan.

One critical factor for successful refugee settlement is self-reliance. In consultation with Karen refugees, we are exploring possible job opportunities for resettled refugees such as weaving and agriculture, taking into account their skills and potential. Of course, deciding where to settle is up to the refugees. In my view, unless alternatives are shown to them, most of the resettled Karen refugees would remain in Shinjuku area where the initial 6 months orientation program is conducted. I am concerned that some of the refugees who have spent years in mountain area in Myanmar/Thailand may find it difficult to live in such a metropolitan city. One may wish urban life, while some others may wish to live in rural areas like Matsumoto. What I want to offer them is more than one option, that is, a few alternatives from which they can choose one. The Japanese government has committed to "share responsibility" internationally to accept refugees by the new resettlement program. It is time for local governments and citizens to "share responsibility" within Japan.

Another goal of mine is to create a textbook on refugee issues for use at universities. Currently, interest towards refugee issues is increasing but there are few Japanese textbooks on the subject. My hope is to produce a textbook that covers a wide range issues such as conflicts, IDPs and human mobility. Last year, when I visited the Refugee Studies Center at the Oxford University, among the thousands of books displayed, there were only two English books concerning Japan's refugee policy. There is also a desperate need of providing information on Japanese refugee problems through English texts so that information is shared with policy makers, researchers and practitioners across the globe.