

Gathering in a neighboring country, remote work for Sudan

On April 11, 2019, a coup d'etat in Sudan deposed President Bashir, who had been in power for 30 years. Since December of the previous year, demonstrations had been mounting in various parts of the country as public protests were staged against soaring prices of bread and fuel. Political change finally occurred when the military detained the top of the administration claiming to reflect the will of the people. At that time, we were working on a technical cooperation project "Capacity Development Project for Irrigation Scheme Management in River Nile State in the Republic of the Sudan" and were staying in the local city of Damar. Given the circumstances we were forced to evacuate. It took several days to get back to Japan but on my way from Damar to the capital city of Khartoum, and then to the airport, I saw things in the country seemed calm and in all honesty I felt no real sense of alarm. We had to return to Japan temporarily, but we were hoping that the situation would soon settle down and we would be able to resume project activities in Sudan.

Two months later, as things continued to deteriorate, we began to lose hope. In early June, when we were still waiting in Japan for the situation to stabilize, a large number of people were killed or injured during a crackdown on a demonstration by elements in the military. The danger information level issued by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Japan was raised from 2 to 3, which means that JICA's experts or Japanese officials can no longer travel to Sudan. The above-mentioned project was approaching the end of its fourth year, and it was an important time to summarize, but due to the suspension of travel, we were forced to tie things up and supervise project conclusion from a country very far from the field.

Fortunately, the direction of activities and issues was fully shared with the Sudanese counterparts (CP) and national staff (NS). After discussions with the JICA side, it was decided to carry out three remote operations in neighboring Ethiopia on business trips each lasting about two weeks from mid-August to November. Given the circumstances, we stayed at a hotel in the Ethiopian

capital, Addis Ababa, and joined 10 Sudanese CP/NS, and started collaborative work with 5 Japanese nationals. The main task was to ascertain status of on-site work following the coup d'etat departure of Japanese staff, prepare project conclusion results, advisories, technical manuals and ensure that the project would remain self sustaining and successful. CP/NS are divided into two teams, irrigation and agriculture, but as we were confined in a hotel room together for several days we had ample time to discuss things and find common ground and work together. Meeting face to face was useful.

Some CP/NS colleagues coming from the heat of Sudan found the cold of Ethiopia's highland environment initially difficult and got sick but despite this the productivity and efficiency of our meetings went far beyond expectations. The unfinished leftover part became 'homework' until the next trip, and our collaborative work was promoted with a feeling of face-to-face intimacy.



Intensive meeting held in the cool climate conditions of Addis Ababa with Sudanese

September, saw the danger travel advisories come down so it became possible to return to Sudan and made a return visit to Ethiopia unnecessary. The final seminar was held in Khartoum with the participation of Japanese staff. It must have been good to say direct thanks to the many people who took care of us in Sudan, including farmers and rural women, at the finalization of the project. However, our two-time 'distant gatherings' with Sudanese in exotic Ethiopia was a valuable opportunity to discover a fresh side of CP/NS.

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