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Mauritanian Oasis in Need of Improvement in the Living Environment

The plane from Paris was gradually losing altitude yet the view from the window still comprised only sand dunes interspersed with mud houses. Having been informed that the Mauritanian capital Nouakchott had a population of some 500,000 to 600,000, I had expected to see some tall buildings and tarred highways. But such expectations were completely belied by the approaching view below. I got the opportunity to visit this country for JICA's study starting from this June and although I had visited desert countries in the Gulf region many times, the desert state of Mauritania gave me a very different impression.

The study site is an inland oasis region, extremely arid land with an annual rainfall of less than 100mm. Once the wind starts to blow, ones eyes suffer from the continuous assault of sand. The heat was not so severe. The site needs to be approached by no less than two 4WD cars, to be prepared for any accidents while passing through the dune area. The cars have to travel where there is no road, sometimes on dangerously precarious cliffs, and just as the travelers are beginning to wonder what sort of oasis could possibly exist in such a desert country, villages with several thousand people finally appear.

The study started just before the rainy season set in. This is the time when the life of oasis residents becomes poorest. There were almost no green vegetables in the souk (market). The only items on sale then were small amounts of rock salt, potatoes, cereals, dry carrots and onions. Some villages have no midwives, doctors or pharmacies. The only means of transportation is by 4WD vehicle. These serve as both taxi and truck, traveling between villages a few times a day. During our field visit one of the study members brought a pregnant woman who had fallen into a critical condition to a hospital in the city. Later I was told that she did not survive. I then severely felt the indescribable difficulty of people's lives here

In such a difficult environment people are making every effort for survival. They cultivate dates and keep livestock with the limited water that is available from the wells, and grow vegetables in the tiny fields around the wells. There are lamps and pumps driven by solar energy. Everything is utilized with good care and without waste. I also saw tree plantations here and there to protect farmland from wind and sand.

In other desert countries in the Gulf region I could always find people driving in expensive cars, a good deal of tarred roads, cold Coke and air-conditioned rooms. However, that is not the case with Mauritania. People leading a harsh life in this country put forward a number of requests to the study team. The purpose of this study activity was to find a way to improve people's life in the oasis region. What could and should be done by making the most of the region's limited resources and helping people to support themselves, while maintaining the local traditions? While contemplating this I felt tense and was keenly aware of the significance of this task and of the seriousness of our responsibility.

(By Zaitsu at an oasis in Mauritanian, June 29, 2001)



Items on sale in the souk
(rock salt, beans, onions etc).



Meeting with the oasis association (the person in
blue is the head of the association).