

Kobe's dignified survivors

Individual efforts amid the ruins of Kobe have been both brave and telling. One eyewitness tells his own story of assistance during the aftermath of the Great Hanshin Earthquake.

By **ERIC M. OLSON**

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On Jan. 27, nine members of our hastily named Fukuoka International Action Group left for Kobe with three vans loaded with food, supplies and a large bakery oven.

As we entered the city after midnight and the broken buildings began to eerily appear, I found myself questioning my motivation for coming.

With our faces pressed closely to the van windows, staring as if we were on some amusement ride from hell, I wondered if I had not come partly just to view the overwhelming disaster.

How much was I tending to my ego by taking part? I was proud of the people involved and the relief effort we had organized, but I could not help wondering if my effort was as pure and selfless as it should have been.

We drove down a narrow street where every house had spilled onto the pavement. To the left, a twisted light signal dutifully changed colors before a side road filled with rubble. To the right, a grizzled, confused old man pushed an empty cart into the darkness. Our van which had been full of conversation a few hours earlier, was now completely quiet.

As we made our way the next morning to a playground that held roughly 200 homeless Vietnamese and Japanese, the



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Volunteer efforts made all the difference in Kobe.

sunshine and freshness lifted the surreal heaviness of the night before.

For the next eight hours we distributed clothes and other needed supplies and cooked 400 chicken, potato, soup, and homemade bread dinners to lines of extremely hungry, but gracious people.

In the afternoon, we had time to survey the damage. The main shopping arcade was gutted completely and covered by twisted poles that gave way to the sky. Beyond the arcade, block after block lay in ruins. I wandered into a field of rubble burned flat in every direction, the smell of ash still strong, the air holding the memory of chaos and storm. I pocketed a small piece of burned roof tile, I took pictures, but I felt ashamed.

Returning to the camp just before sunset, I sat on a park bench. Next to me, children with satisfied stomachs had the energy and spirit to play on the swings, their shouts and songs filling the air with

a calming peace.

The dinner that followed was a great success and afterwards we popped popcorn with some of the kids. Their laughter made it clear it was not just boxes of goods the people needed. They also needed the friendship and human warmth that a relief truck just could not supply.

That evening, we headed for a high school in the hills that our members had visited with supplies the week before. We cooked up another 100 chicken dinners for those who wanted a late meal then gathered around open fires.

A few of us headed for the gymnasium to see who wanted food. The small entry to the gym was packed with older men exchanging conversation and cigarettes, all of them unshaven but full of exuberance at our arrival. I hesitated to open the door to the gym, finally entering in stunned silence.

To see 500 people lying head to head in such calm and utter quiet was overwhelming.

Before we left, these people blessed with such spirit, who had sustained themselves on mainly bananas and rice balls, gave us a box of precious tangerines and asked us to please return.

As we headed out after midnight onto the highway that runs above Kobe City, my concerns over motivation had disappeared. If they had been dogged by worries of egocentricity before, the extraordinary patience and goodwill of the people in the face of such a disaster had transformed me.

This country may have been humbled by the quake, but it may also have received a new clarity about what is important in life. All I know is that I received far more than I gave in Kobe and I shall be there again in a few days.

The author is a freelance writer based in Fukuoka.