

One Step Forward – Relief Work for Damaged Documents at Aceh, Indonesia by Isamu Sakamoto

[photo no.1, photo no.2]

1. Appeal by the Five Experts Committee for Saving Cultural Heritage Damaged by the Great Earthquake off Sumatra and Subsequent Tsunamis

It has been almost one year since the Great Earthquake and subsequent Tsunamis struck the area off Sumatra on December 26, 2004. I still cannot forget the shock of watching the news clips broadcast all over the world, showing everything getting drowned and swept away by great tsunamis. For the sake of hundreds of thousands of victims of this catastrophe, I believe that it is important to look back what we have done so far to help relieve the devastated area for the last one year since the disaster so that we can learn something for the future disaster planning.

Looking back, I have realized that it was exactly on the tenth anniversary of the Kobe Great Earthquake, January 17, 2005, that the “Appeal by the Five Experts Committee for Saving Cultural Heritage Damaged by the Great Earthquake off Sumatra and Subsequent Tsunamis” was released. The Committee was set up by five people, including this author, who were deeply concerned with the situation of the stricken area to call for support from organizations and individuals within Japan. The Committee issued the second appeal on February 3, as the “Second Urgent Appeal by the Five Experts Committee for Saving Cultural Heritage Damaged by the Great Earthquake off Sumatra and Subsequent Tsunamis.” Both the first and second appeals are included in my today’s paper for your information.

Four members of the Committee, Shigeo Aoki, Masahito Ando, Masaya Takayama, and myself, have shared active experiences of relief work on cultural heritage after the Kobe earthquake. I think that “real experiences at the site of the disaster” must have made us feel that we must do something to give support to the area devastated by this unprecedented catastrophe of the Great Earthquake off Sumatra, and must have made us all move into action. I believe that this experience at Kobe has been a driving force for us to do this unique relief work which seems to be more advanced than what many other countries of the world have done so far.

I would like to introduce the activities of the Five Experts Committee briefly:

When we launched our appeal on January 17, 2005, we set the whole disaster-stricken area as the target for our relief work, including Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Indonesia, and put emphasis on collecting information on damaged cultural heritage first. Soon we found, however, that we could scarcely obtain any useful information that we really needed. Mass media provided little practical information while the Internet was putting out a flood of information. Both sources did not prove to be useful for our purpose. As we started from scratch, we could not make any practical plan and action without accurate information on the damaged cultural heritage. Therefore we realized that the first thing we had to make the utmost effort is to collect information on the exact damage by utilizing networks of contacts of each member of the Committee. Because most of the contacts Ando and Sakamoto had known were located in Indonesia and also because Sakamoto had done an investigation of ancient documents in Aceh in 1998 with financial assistance from the Japan Foundation, the main source of information we could use naturally became the National Archive of Indonesia.

There was, however, a limit on collecting information by email or telephone; that is, we could not obtain the “direct professional information,” which we really needed to start the relief work. As we thought that fund-raising would have to go through lengthy process, we negotiated directly with the Toyota Foundation. The Toyota Foundation promptly responded to our request and endowed us with a subsidy of one million yen as costs for local investigation and purchasing emergency support materials. On January 23, six days after the release of the first appeal, Sakamoto and another expert went to Jakarta, delivering emergency support materials including collapsible styrene-foam plastic boxes, **[photo no.3]** disinfectant sprays and ethanol, masks, gloves, large plastic bags, and electronic torches, which altogether weighed about 140 kilograms. (Collapsible styrene-foam plastic boxes are useful even when get soaked in water and are proved to be very useful for the future disaster relief work).

As we heard that Aceh was still in a very bad state of confusion, our one-week activities were restricted within Jakarta area. However, while in Jakarta, we could have intensive discussion with directors of the National Archive and the National Library of Indonesia on the future relief work. One thing we could also manage to do was to provide 200,000 yen for an Indonesian researcher, who happened to be an old colleague of us and wanted to visit Aceh to investigate the damage but could not afford the cost of travel and photographing tools. With this support he could visit and investigate the places where foreigners had not been able to enter. Through the experiences at Kobe, we

have learned that it is important to cooperate with “local” professionals and people as well as to get support from the outside area. Thus we believe that the investigation by local researchers at an early stage of disaster relief, such as the one we have supported this time, will be essential in the future, too.

As we heard that the situation in the stricken area had become more stable while the time limit of saving damaged materials had been reaching the end, we decided to enter Aceh for the period of eight days starting February 6. According to the information from Jakarta, “Aceh was still in a dangerous state,” so we were forced to change our plan to shorten the period of stay in Aceh to two days. We found, however, that the people’s lives in Aceh were much better and that there were much more plenty of food available compared to the state in Kobe of the same stage after the earthquake. During the two days of our stay in Aceh, we investigated the damage of local institutions and facilities that the National Archive had arranged for us. On the morning of the second day of our stay, we held a “workshop on how to save and treat the damaged books and documents” **[photo no.4, photo no.5, photo no.6]** for 20 participants from seven institutions. We also gave as much information as possible to the press both home and foreign about our relief work.

The time limit for saving damaged materials is a severe challenge and is often determined by a kind of disasters and conditions of the stricken area. In many cases, it is most desirable to start relief work within the first 48 hours as indicated in the “Emergency Response and Salvage Wheel” (in Japanese, “Bunkazai Bosai Wheel”) issued by the Agency for Cultural Affairs. Especially in the cases of disasters caused by water, it has been said that “treatment to lower the humidity” within the first 24 hours by emergency draining and dehumidifying can “save cost and considerably improve the recovery rate” in the subsequent conservation and restoration work.

The activities of the Five Experts Committee for the first two months from the disaster were solely based on individual voluntary works as I explained just now. From the beginning we had foreseen how much we could have done on a voluntary basis and had discussed the necessity of carrying on this relief work to a public organization at some stage, based on the needs of the stricken area.

In our support activities at Aceh, it was expected that not only the relief work for the damaged cultural heritage but also the conservation and restoration of land register

documents which are called “vital record” as they certify the residents’ right should be taken over by public organizations. To put a plan into reality of taking over the work to a suitable organization, our human network played an important role. The result was that the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) took up the responsibility of conservation and restoration of the vital record.

For the third time, Sakamoto entered Aceh as a JICA specialist for the period of 23 days from February 23. It had been already two months since the disaster, but other than Sakamoto from Japan, it appeared that no conservators team had come to Aceh from abroad to save and restore the damaged documents. Sakamoto did the relief work as follows:

1) Washing away the mud and soaking the damaged materials in ethanol disinfectant
At that time, black mud carried by the tsunamis was called magma, and the local people were scared of the magma as something that could harm people because they have seen the magma killing live trees. Thus it was important to ease the people’s fear first, no matter what kind of materials we would like to save. I taught people to wash away the materials by bottled water sold at market **[photo no.7, photo no.8, photo no.9]** and then soak them in ethanol disinfectant. **[photo no.10, photo no.11, photo no.12]** By using ethanol disinfectant, while erasing off the people’s fear, we intended to give antiseptic effect on damaged documents and preserve enough moisture of the documents necessary for vacuum freeze-drying process to be carried later on.

2) Documentation and boxing

After soaking the documents in ethanol disinfectant, archivists documented the date, subject and other information on each item; wrapped them up with water resistant paper one by one so as not to have them fixed together when frozen; and boxed them with their backs on the bottom in plastic boxes. **[photo no.13, photo no.14, photo no.15]**

3) Transportation by the Indonesian Air Force

Because there are no freezing warehouses in Aceh, with special permission by the director of the BPN (National Land Agency), the boxed documents were transported in two batches by the Indonesian Air Force to a freezing warehouse in Jakarta. **[photo no.16, photo no.17, photo no.18, photo no.19]** It was a grand-scale operation to save 13 tons of vital record in total. **[photo no.20, photo no.21, photo no.22]**

4) Future works

Frozen documents will be safely and effectively dried by using a large-scale vacuum freeze-drying chamber of books (11 tons in weight) which was delivered from Japan. This chamber can process 200 volumes in one batch, and to process one batch takes about one week. On this very day of this symposium I am working in Indonesia as chief executive manager of “restoration project of land register documents damaged by the Aceh Tsunamis.” Attracting world attention, this project is sponsored by the government of Japan with financial aid of several hundreds of million yen and will continue until summer 2006.

2. What I saw and heard in Aceh

Aceh has completely changed from what it used to be when I visited for investigation seven years ago in 1998: a magnificent mosque which served as a symbol of the town is now badly damaged, **[photo no.23]** and lawn and flowerbeds which once beautifully encircled the mosque have gone. Most of the ancient Islamic documents I saw that time have been washed away and never to see. The huge hotel I slept in has collapsed completely.

Along the streets washed out by the tsunami I saw many people spreading out their personal books and photographs in order to dry in the scorching heat. However, most of such items had already become useless due to abrupt dehydration and delayed treatment. The memory of family and region have been lost in great scale.

Important information servers of the IAIN Ar-Raniri, a public Islamic university in Banda Aceh, and newspaper companies have either been stolen or left without any treatment after damaged by seawater. Digital information accumulated from the past has disappeared all too easily.

In the case of libraries and archives of which ground floor was washed away by the tsunami, it is said that important documents became useless because of "the lack of professional conservators" despite they were rescued once. Such documents include lost precious 300 photo albums of the Sukarno days of the 1960s **[photo no.24]** as well as administrative documents on police, trials and taxes.

From lesson of this disaster and for the repose of the soul of the victims and the lost

documents and historical heritage, I hope the survived cultural heritage and documents will be protected and preserved in a more proactive way.

3. Evaluation and reflection

Recently support to disasters that occurred in other counties and regions is extended internationally and becoming more professional. Experiences have been accumulated at each occasion and documented and shared, which enables people who have never experienced such disasters to learn from the past. For example, the Colorado State University Library published a 600-page handbook titled "Library Disaster Planning and Recovery Handbook," based on the experience that its collection was damaged by the flood in 1997, and it was referred to when the University of Hawaii was struck by disaster. Such a trend is estimable as large-scale disasters are occurring frequently worldwide.

On the other hand, support system for conservation specialists and other experts to take swift action is yet to be established, which plagued us this time at Aceh. Due to the frequent attacks of disaster and economic turmoil, shortage of relief fund and lack of support to and placement of personnel have become a serious problem worldwide.

Based on the reflection of the past and the recognized challenges, I believe it is most wanted to make a practical and pragmatic step forward for the establishment of the personnel support and placement.

4. Domestic and international support system

Libraries, archives and museums have constructed various networks. Communication technologies and other infrastructures that will enhance the formation and development of networks are growing in tremendous speed.

Rapid and concrete action against disaster was discussed and problems have been overcome in such occasions as the Duchess Anna Amalia library fire (Weimar, September 2004), Hamilton Library Flood (University of Hawaii, Manoa, October 2004) and the bust in the water main in the Jinkan-Sojin Library (library of the Graduate School of Human and Environmental Studies and Faculty of Integrated Human Studies, Kyoto University, December 2004).

Hereafter what we really need is the "backup system" enabling "concrete support" for

the disaster-stricken site. In private sector, BELFOR and other disaster relief corporations have been active and I expect such activities will be expanded.

Should such private disaster relief corporations develop, can libraries and archives ease up on disaster planning and establishment of international support system? The answer is "no." Libraries and archives have staff who has the best knowledge about the materials, so they must bear professional responsibility and the spirit of mutual aid. Leaving everything to others may result in tragedy of losing things which would have been saved otherwise.

Extending support for disaster-stricken libraries and other institutions in the world definitely makes us well prepared for internal disasters, too. This is what we have learned from the examples of the past.

In order to provide efficient and effective support for disaster-stricken libraries in the world, I expect the IFLA and IFLA/PAC regional centres to develop a tool on the web for prompt information gathering with the function to share reliable information among registered members who hold access code. An active maneuverable core function will help our fund-raising and open up possibility of establishing co-operative partnership with disaster relief corporations like BELFOR and associations that consist of conservation specialists such as the AIC (American Institute for Conservation of Historic & Artistic Works), the CCI (Canadian Conservation Institute), the IADA (International Association of Book and Paper Conservators) and the Japan Society for the Conservation of Cultural Property.

Japan was able to make use of the experience of the Great Hanshi-Awaji Earthquake for the relief activities in Indonesia after Indian Ocean earthquake. I hope the specialists who experienced the disaster in Sri Lanka and Indonesia will make use of their experience and give assistance to other disasters that may occur in future and so will the network of the international aid spread worldwide.

Isamu Sakamoto

Conservation specialist of JICA assisting relief work for damaged land register documents at Aceh