

THE IMPACT OF CIVIL WAR ON A WELL-DEVELOPED EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

The ancient Syrian capital Damascus is one of the world's oldest cities. Damascus University, established in 1923, has a history of almost a century. Damascus University and the University of Aleppo, established in 1958, are considered top academic institutions in the Middle East. They have produced many of the region's prominent business leaders and politicians. Syria has historically had a high level of education among Mid-

dle Eastern countries, boasting a primary education enrollment rate of almost 100% and a literacy rate exceeding 95%. That was before the civil war.

Currently, it is said that Syrian refugees in Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan number about two million, one million, and 0.6 million, respectively. These are official numbers registered with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and the actual numbers could be even higher. Lebanon's population

is 4.5 million and Jordan's is 6.5 million. It is easy to imagine the huge burden placed on the recipient countries to accept and provide appropriate administrative services for such large numbers of refugees. Many children and young refugees are also deprived of the opportunity to study.

Once the civil war ends, Syria will surely need human resources to rebuild the country. Through various programs such as the Project for Human Resources Development Scholarship (JDS), JICA has invited many people from all over the world to study in Japan. These students are expected to return to their own countries and become the leaders of the next generation there. Within this context, a new program called the Japanese Initiative for the Future of Syrian Refugees (JISR) began last year to support the capacity development of young Syrians.

Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe announced this initiative before the Ise-shima Summit, which took place in 2016. Under the program, Japan, through JICA and the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, will accept thirty Syrian students a year over a 5-year period for up to 150 Syrian students who will receive an opportunity to study in Japan: JICA will take care of up to 100 Syrian students over the next five years. To be eligible for the program, an applicant should hold either a bachelor's degree or equivalent academic experience and be registered as a refugee by UNHCR in Lebanon or Jordan. The application process for the first cohort began at the end of November of 2016. There were 120 applications, six times the number of available places. The fields of intended study varied from agriculture to engineering to Japanese language and culture, but most applicants chose a science-related major. The successful applicants arrived in Japan this summer to prepare for the new academic year starting in September.

exchange students.

A unique feature of this program is that it allows students to bring along their spouse and children when they come to Japan. The staff member explains, "Sometimes, other exchange students bring their family to Japan during their study in Japan. In principle, we recommend that students establish themselves and settle down in Japan for at least six months before inviting their family. However, once refugees step out of the country of refuge to study in Japan, they may not be able to return to reunite with their family. We therefore give them the option of bringing their family to Japan from the beginning." It is expected that many of the students may wish to bring their families to Japan. JICA's policy, therefore, is to do its utmost so that the students and their families can adapt to Japan's living environment with support from universities and local communities.

JICA is also considering how best to support the students' job searches after graduation. Under this program, the students can study in Japan for a total of three years, including a one-year preparation period and two years to earn a master's degree. During the three years, the students are expected to study Japanese language and take part in an internship program at Japanese companies. Internship programs are already in place under the Master's Degree and Internship Program of the African Business Education Initiative for Youth (the ABE Initiative). Many African students who studied under this program are working in Japanese companies in Japan or in their own countries. There is no doubt that they will become a bridge between Africa and Japan.

The staff member explains, "For many Syrian students, Japan is a far-away country. For many Japanese, Syria is a country of conflicts that they do not know well. We hope that the relationships that Syrian students living in Japan will build with Japanese students and the local community will become the basis for deeper exchanges between the two countries."

Nobody knows when the Syrian conflict will end. Meanwhile, we begin building bridges for the day when peace comes.



For the future of their homeland

While the Syrian civil war drags on, many well-educated young Syrians who would have become the pillars of their society have fled the country. Japan has significant experience accepting international students from all over the world. The Japanese government has announced its intention to accept Syrian students to study in Japan, so that they might become the leaders of the next generation.



A Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteer teaching children with disabilities. (Photo by Jiro Nakahara, 2006)



Young Syrian refugees studying in a school inside a refugee camp in Jordan. This generation will support the future of Syria (Photo by Kyo Shimizu)

PROTECTING STUDENTS AGAINST UNCERTAINTY

In general, when a citizen runs into trouble overseas, the embassy or the consulate of the citizen's country will assist his or her safe return home.

However, this is not the case for refugees. Particularly for Syrian citizens, due to the ongoing civil war, once they flee the country as refugees, it becomes difficult to obtain a guarantee of status from the state. Moreover, when refugees leave the country of refuge, there is no guarantee of reentry.

A staff member in charge of coordinating the program commented, "In the past, most students we accepted were government officials who were given endorsements from their country. After studying in Japan, they returned home to work for their country. However, this is the first case for us to accept refugees, and we needed to be considerate of their status." To prepare a flawless system to accept Syrian students, JICA collaborated closely not only with UNHCR but also with universities that have experience admitting



Before the conflict, most Syrians were educated and many female students studied electronics. (Photo by Sanae Numata, 2004)