

Agas-Agas

How beauty displaced danger



Beauty and danger go together in some parts of the Philippine countryside. On the Agas-Agas section of the Philippines-Japan Friendship Highway, in a mountainous area of Southern Leyte province, until August 2009 the greater presence was mortal danger.

The short, winding, precarious road was carved into unstable mountainsides. Heavy rains caused frequent landslides. Lives were lost.

The road was a mere 1.5-kilometer link but its frequent closure by landslides meant shutdowns in the highway that runs from north to south of the Philippines and disruption in the lives of people in the region. The economic losses, like the road restoration costs, were tremendous.

Engineering studies by foreign and local experts had sought countermeasures against the landslides and the loss of life and

property. Then, in 2006, one study proposed a lasting solution: to construct a 350-meter-long bridge over a deep ravine, one that would straddle two mountains and bypass the winding Agas-Agas section of the national highway.

The plan was ambitious. It called for a concrete, hollow-box girder bridge 84 meters high. This was to be the tallest structure of its kind in the country, and never had this type of infrastructure been attempted in Philippine construction history.

The Department of Public Works and Highways (DPWH) took on the challenge, but the government had

neither the needed technology nor the funds.

The Philippine government sought funding from a source that had assisted it in other infrastructure developments of vital importance: Japan Bank for International Cooperation, or JBIC, whose ODA function has since been merged with that of JICA.

At the time, JBIC was funding the construction of a very large development — the Subic-Clark-Tarlac Expressway, or SCTEX, a 94-kilometer, four-lane highway to connect together the Subic Bay Freeport Zone, the Clark Special Economic Zone, and the bustling growth hub in Tarlac City.

Now the Philippines' longest and most advanced toll expressway, SCTEX is also the most scenic, with long horizontal lines and occasional curves accentuated by tall, graceful lampposts, all amid moving vistas of mountains under wide open skies. Built on what had been rough and raw terrain, it had foreshadowed in a quintessential way the achievement at Agas-Agas.

To construct the Agas-Agas Bridge, JBIC provided a soft loan of 6.723 billion yen. The DPWH engaged Japanese consultants to prepare the detailed project design. A major Japanese company won the construction contract in an international competitive bidding.

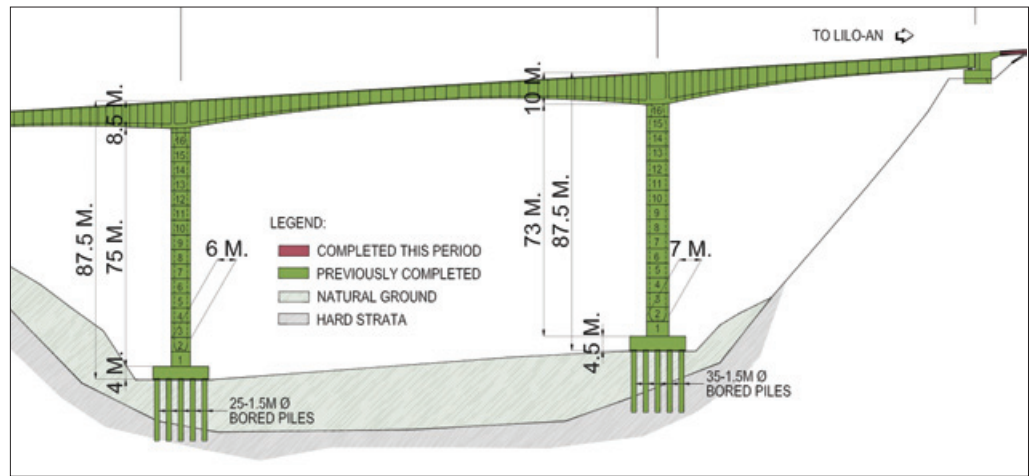
The builders met with unexpected challenges even during excavation for the bridge's foundations. They discovered that one of the abutments was going to stand on unstable ground. They called in geological experts, and subsequently adjusted the project design.

But, as the Agas-Agas Bridge took shape, the beauty of the place around it became prominent. High over lush greenery, the bridge offered magnificent panoramic views of mountains and rivers.

The DPWH, realizing the potential for tourism,



Straddling two mountains, the **Agas-Agas Bridge** provides safety on a winding section of the Japan-Philippines Friendship Highway.



installed observation decks on both sides of the bridge. It also provided other amenities, including restrooms, near it.

President Gloria Arroyo herself remarked on the potential when she and Japanese Ambassador Makoto Katsura inaugurated the bridge in August 2009. "Tourism will be enhanced," she said. "Travel will be convenient and people will be assured of safety."

The President spoke with some residents and they told her that the bridge had proven to be of valuable help in their livelihood and in their lives, and they no longer feared being struck by falling rocks.

Even before the Agas-Agas Bridge opened, it had

already garnered travelers' raves on the Internet. Notably, some posts recalled comments previously made about SCTEX, such as that it "looks majestic" and that "it is a real work of art."

One comment is most significant: This is "the new replacing the old."

Meanwhile, the Philippine government is currently constructing more than 100 bridges around the country under a Japanese loan agreement titled, "Urgent Bridges Construction for Rural Development."

That may mean the new is replacing the old in over a hundred different places.

The Philippines' longest and most advanced toll expressway, the **SCTEX** is also the most picturesque.

