



Members of the 3rd Engineering Platoon of the 9th Contingent work to create a 400-meter track at the Brook Ground, January 7 to 15, 2016.
COURTESY OF MINISTRY OF DEFENSE

Keeping the Peace in South Sudan

AKIRA UMEZAWA

IN the twenty-five years since the Act on Cooperation for United Nations Peacekeeping Operations and Other Operations (PKO Act) was enacted in June 1992, Japan has been actively engaged in cooperation with UN peacekeeping operations, International Humanitarian Relief Operations, and International Election Observation Operations, providing both human and material resources in the name of

international peace, chiefly through the UN. In fact, since sending personnel to Cambodia to monitor the election in 1992, the Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) have had a hand in fourteen UN peacekeeping operations (UN PKO) and refugee relief activities, in locations such as Mozambique, Goma (Democratic Republic of the Congo), the Golan Heights (Israel, Syria), Indonesia, Pakistan, Timor-Leste, Jordan, Nepal, Sudan, Haiti and – as in the focus of this story – South Sudan.

“PEACE AND UNITY”

On 16 January 2016, a national sporting event took place in Juba, the capital of South Sudan, a city ravaged by many years of civil war. Based on the theme “Peace and Unity,” the South Sudanese government designated this occasion as “National Unity Day,” as a sign of hope for the future. Around 350 male and female athletes from nine cities nationwide took part in the event, competing through to January 23.

Behind the scenes of this national sporting event, Japan’s UN PKO unit was hard at work.

With South Sudan struggling to secure funds to cover even basic government services, including health and education, the condition of the three venues for the event was very poor. Officials were worried about the risk of athletes injuring themselves during the competition.



Second Lieutenant Yoshinori Takahashi, leader of the 3rd Engineering Platoon of the 9th Contingent
AKIRA UMEZAWA

With that in mind, the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), which provides Official Development Assistance (ODA) in South Sudan, approached the Japanese PKO engineering unit from the Self-Defense Forces.

Second Lieutenant Yoshinori Takahashi, leader of the 3rd Engineering Platoon of the 9th contingent, recalls, “Members of my platoon were very excited about this.” Compared to their daily activities in the camp, this was a chance for them to do something that would directly bring smiles to the faces of South Sudanese people.

Members of the platoon improved the track at Brook Ground, one of the venues for the event, for nine days from January 7 to 15.

“Sports are a symbol of peace and unity,” says Takahashi. “We all said to one another that we wanted to do the best possible job, so that the ground would become a place long loved by South Sudanese people.”

Under scorching temperatures of over 50°C during the day, Japanese peacekeepers embedded 200 straight concrete blocks and 1,000 curved concrete blocks for the corners in the ground by hand, one by one, to create the inner track of a 400-meter course that would be durable for many years.

A senior official from the South Sudanese government gave a speech at the opening ceremony for the event, commenting, “we need peace and unity now more than ever.” There were also teary eyes among some cabinet members as the athletes entered the venue, with their national flag in hand. The government sincerely hoped to call for the national unity of the people of South Sudan, having athletes from different regions and ethnic groups compete in the spirit of fair play. Holding this event was symbolic of one of their heartfelt desires for South Sudan.

Although members of the 3rd Engineering Platoon were unable to attend in person, as they were busy with another assignment, they were able to share in the joy of the event through their colleagues who played traditional Japanese drums at the ceremony, commenting, “the athletes gave it their all, transcending differences between regions and ethnic groups.”

Platoon Leader Takahashi had the following to say.



Athletes from different regions and ethnic groups of South Sudan enter the venue united under the new nation's flag.
COURTESY OF JICA



Action from the men's 200-meters final
COURTESY OF JICA



South Sudanese athletes join together in the name of “Peace and Unity.”
COURTESY OF JICA

“In 2020, Tokyo will be hosting the Olympic and Paralympic games. It’s exciting to think that South Sudanese athletes from this ground could be performing on the world stage in Tokyo.”

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe touched upon these support activities in a policy speech in January this year.

“What the SDF members built isn’t just a sports ground. It is a place where peace is created. Without any doubt, each and every activity engaged in by the SDF in South Sudan connects directly to the country’s self-dependence and peaceful nation-building.” The Prime Minister went on to make an appeal to “contribute as much as we can to global peace and prosperity.”

Twenty-five years since getting involved in UN PKO, Japan is set to keep on contributing to peace and stability for the international community in the future. **J**