

Tent Village & Che Guevara

By Masakazu HOSODA

How would a *Japan SPOTLIGHT* reader residing in Japan respond when asked what scene he/she thinks best symbolizes the problems besetting Japanese society from 2008 to 2009? Would it be embattled Prime Minister Taro Aso's answers to questions from opposition members in the National Diet, the press conference given by the chief executive of struggling auto giant Toyota Motor, or members of the Imperial Family greeting New Year well-wishers at the Imperial Palace despite various difficulties facing the court?

If I were asked the same question, I would reply that the most symbolic scene of present-day Japanese society was the “year-crossing tent village” set up in Tokyo's Hibiya Park for six days over the New Year period from December 31 for people who had lost both their job and home amid the global financial crisis.

Hibiya Park is in the neighborhood of Kasumigaseki, the political heart of Japan that includes the Diet and most government offices. The Imperial Palace is close by. The park is also within walking distance from plush hotels, theaters and the posh Ginza shopping district where upscale department stores and foreign name-brand shops are concentrated. If likened to the United States, it is an area combining the White House neighborhood in Washington and New York's Fifth Avenue. There appeared the “refugee camp” for people hit by the “disaster of unemployment.”

According to press reports, the tent village was established by a working committee organized by citizen groups and labor unions to serve meals and lodging for dismissed temporary workers forced to leave corporate accommodation. On December 31, about 130 homeless temporary workers registered themselves as “village residents.” A large number of volunteers worked together to serve *toshikoshi-soba* (year-crossing noodles) according to the New Year's Eve custom and offered consultations on obtaining welfare benefits.

The service in itself may have been no more than a social activity based on goodwill. But things took an unexpected turn when the government joined the relief operation. As the number of people seeking shelter and food at the village continued to increase, the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, whose office tower looks down on Hibiya Park from across the street, opened part of its facilities to accommodate 500 people, serving meals and offering employment consultations. The move spotlighted the fact that at a place close to what may be called the nation's political nerve center, government authorities had to directly deal with a new breed of poor people produced in one of the world's most advanced capitalist societies.



Photo: Kyodo News

Jobless and homeless people gather as a “year-crossing tent village” is declared open at a ceremony in Tokyo's Hibiya Park on Dec. 31 to offer them food and accommodation during the New Year period.

Being the editor of cultural news at a news agency, I was instantly reminded by these developments of a unique press conference held at Meiji University in Tokyo last December. It was called by dashing American movie director Steven Soderbergh to promote his new film “Che,” a two-part biopic of Argentine-born revolutionary Ernesto Che Guevara. The press conference, also attended by actor Benicio del Toro, who played the title role in the film, was held in a rare manner – seating both media representatives and students.

Soderbergh, who was casually handling trite questions from members of the press, leaned forward when a female student asked: “University students once rose to fight against a damned society. But students today are apathetic. What do you think of this difference?” Soderbergh answered emphatically, saying: “To bring about changes, we must act together with our comrades. But we must have alternative solutions in place when we seek changes. Mere objections will not do. The student movement in the 1960s was easily subdued by the establishment despite its strong energy because it failed to offer alternatives.”

There are growing voices in Japan lamenting the country's socioeconomic woes such as the widening social divide, economic recession, poverty, political confusion and young people's tendency to prefer online interactions over real-life connections. Such voices are not necessarily wide of the mark. But what matters is to make honest efforts to think of what Soderbergh described as “alternative solutions.” This is what Japan lacks today, isn't it?

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Masakazu Hosoda is chief editor, Cultural News Section, Kyodo News.