

Ban Weapon Exports to Africa

By Noboru HATAKEYAMA

Two destroyers from Japan's Maritime Self-Defense Force (MSDF) are operating in the sea off Somalia to protect commercial ships from possible attacks by pirates. More than 15 countries including the United States, Britain and China have already dispatched their warships to patrol there. This is the first time for Japan to dispatch warships overseas with possibilities to confront enemies directly. Up until now, Japan's ships were only engaged in logistic support on overseas missions. In the Iraq war, MSDF ships were sent to the Indian Ocean to refuel warships from other countries. It is good for Japan to have become more responsible for the security of its commercial ships this time.

Somali pirates were reportedly equipped not only with small arms or light weapons but also with rocket launchers and cannons although they are not the military of the Somali government. Where and how did they acquire weapons to attack? It is often said that they smuggled or even legally imported weapons from abroad.

Generally speaking, there have been many civil wars or government suppressions of civilians in Africa. Whenever advanced countries come across such conflicts in Africa, they often send army or naval troops to conflicting areas for the purpose of trying to prevent those conflicts from becoming more serious. However, what is most important is to eliminate the root causes of conflicts rather than to address conflicts after they have occurred. I am not talking here about determining which side in a conflict is right or proposing to improve the social background behind a conflict. It would be extremely difficult to do so.

However, there is at least one measure for countries outside Africa to adopt to prevent or reduce conflicts. That is to prohibit exports of conventional weapons to Africa. As you know, weapons can be categorized as weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) and conventional weapons. WMDs include nuclear, chemical and biological weapons. WMD production and transfer, including exports and imports, are severely restricted internationally.

However, civil wars or governmental suppressions and movements against them are carried out with conventional weapons. Exports of conventional weapons are not prohibited in general except for certain conventional weapons such as land mines and cluster bombs.

In light of this situation, there is a system in the United Nations to require a country participating in this system to register with the world body an international transfer of seven categories of conventional weapons. The categories are battle tanks, armored combat vehicles, large-caliber artillery systems, combat aircraft, attack helicopters, warships, and missiles and missile launchers. This sys-

tem was established in 1991, based on the joint initiatives of Japan and the EU. More than 110 countries have participated in the system. However, this is just a voluntary system and China, for example, has opted out of the system since 1997, protesting the United States for commencing registration of its weapon exports to Taiwan.

In addition, the system requests participating countries just to register exports and imports of conventional weapons. In other words, the system does not prohibit exports and imports of conventional weapons.

Regulating "small arms and light weapons" was argued intensively also in the United Nations as "de facto WMDs." Although expert meetings were held on the issue and an action program was adopted, it stopped short of prohibiting or restricting exports of conventional weapons. It addressed collection of small arms, for example. An initiative for an arms trade treaty has been under way since 2001. However, the initiative does not address the necessity to prohibit exports of conventional weapons, either.

As we have seen, exports of conventional weapons are free in principle despite the prospect that if many advanced countries and even some developing countries stopped exporting them to Africa, conflicts there would decline dramatically.

Of course conventional weapons are already in use there in Africa. Therefore they can fight each other using existing weapons. However, weapons deplete year by year. Unless additional supplies are coming in from abroad, the situation will be improved quite a lot. Needless to say, African countries can produce indigenous weapons. However, the cost of producing weapons just for the domestic market will be enormous, which works as deterrence against starting domestic weapon production.

Japan has been prohibiting exports of weapons to any country since 1976 except for some cases involving the United States with which Japan has a security treaty. In this regard, Japan is qualified to propose an international conference to discuss the possibility of introducing an international treaty to prohibit exports of conventional weapons to Africa.

The international community should not be complacent with just dispatching warships to patrol the sea off Somalia. It should address seriously and eliminate definitely the root cause of piracy by banning weapon exports to Africa. **JS**

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