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Keynote speech: Yasushi Akashi,  
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of the United Nations for Cambodia

Uryuyama Campus of the Kyoto University of the Arts  
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I am very honored and happy to be invited to this memorial event organized by the Kyoto Peacebuilding Center of Kyoto University of the Arts in memory of the 30th anniversary of the death of Mr. Atsuhito Nakata.

I vividly remember that 30 years ago, one of the largest peacekeeping operations initiated by the United Nations in the early 1990s came into existence in Cambodia, with approximately 22,000 military and civilian personnel. Japan sent its first contingent from the Self-Defense Force, civilian police, and 400 UN Volunteers. Among these personnel deployed, two young Japanese, Mr. Nakata, and a policeman Haruyuki Takada, became the most unfortunate victims. These events were felt widely in Japan with great emotion, giving rise to critical voices to bring back young Japanese personnel from all risks and dangers.

Incidents started to increase in the spring of 1993. Atsuhito Nakata was attacked while traveling in a car in Kampong Thom province on April 8th. The hostile posture of the Khmer Rouge towards the United Nations began to create a tense atmosphere in the country in the autumn of 1992. Upon hearing about the Nakata incident, I immediately convoked a senior staff meeting. I proposed that we change our mode of preparations for democratic elections in Cambodia scheduled for late May from the previous “aggressive posture” to a more “defensive posture.” Even in that case, it was impossible to defend over 22,000 UNTAC personnel entirely from Khmer Rouge terrorism.

Two days after the attack on Mr. Nakata, I received the Nakata family at the UNTAC Headquarters, consisting of his father, mother, and younger sister. I was surprised to find the father smiling broadly and telling me that he was convinced that his son died happily for the good cause of peace and democracy in Cambodia. He said that he was fully satisfied. He told me his son had dreamed of someday becoming an international civil servant. In contrast, the mother and the daughter looked extremely sad due to the latest events.

Seeing this stoic, extraordinary father of the Nakata family, I recalled a story written years ago by Ryunosuke Akutagawa, my favorite author, about a mother of a university student. A professor received the mother of his deceased student at home, obviously in deep sorrow, telling her son's death. However, she had no expression of sadness on her face in total stoicism. The professor found that, while talking, the hands of student's mother were holding a handkerchief very tightly, almost tearing it apart, as if to reflect the traditional stoicism of Japanese Bushido. I was watching the face of Atsuhito's father, who was in a similar emotion without showing it. He later quit his job, became a UN Volunteers' honorary ambassador, and traveled in many countries.

A couple days later, I received a phone call from Mrs. McSweeney, head of UN Volunteers in Geneva. In view of the tragedy of Atsuhito Nakata, she was telling me straight that, if one more UN Volunteer dies, entire 400 would be withdrawn from Cambodia.

On April 20th, I invited 150 volunteers to Phnom Penh. I told them what kind of safety measures UNTAC was implementing at that time, the prospects of elections soon to come, the prospects of peace as well as democracy in Cambodia, which the UN endeavored to construct in the country. There was no critical response from the listening volunteers, who looked deeply devoted to the common cause. However, in Kampong Thom province, where the incident occurred, we noticed communication problems between the Indonesian military contingent and UN Volunteers because of language differences. I also continued meetings with other UN Volunteers in other parts of the country.

It appeared, however, that mass media in the world were rather pessimistic about the Cambodian elections. Secretary-General Boutros-Ghali, then visiting Cambodia for the second time in two years, told me that after reading in New York newspapers from many parts of the world, he had been made pessimistic about the prospects of elections in Cambodia. He said, however that seeing UN officials in Cambodia hard at work to improve electoral prospects and engaged in a lot of grassroots campaigns, including constructing an unprecedented UN radio station set up there, he felt somewhat optimistic now. Those of us at UNTAC were of the view that we had realistic prospects of mobilizing more people's vote, perhaps to about 80% of total votes.

When we finished six days of voting, the final count was over 89%, close to 90% of the total registered voters. It was very clear that, after more than 20 years of not voting at all in this

country, people went to vote with great expectations and much eagerness. I traveled in Cambodia in a helicopter and felt that I was part of the prevailing festive atmosphere of many Cambodian people. Diplomats stationed in Cambodia were equally optimistic about these elections.

A few weeks before the elections, there was an attack by the Khmer Rouge on Japanese civilian police in the northwestern part of Cambodia near Thailand. Several Japanese policemen were attacked there by Khmer Rouge, even though these policemen were under the protection of Dutch troops. Several were wounded, and one, Mr. Haruyuki Takada died. Reaction in Japan to these attacks was a shock, and emotional moves by the families of the policemen involved led to urgent requests for the relocation of these policemen to the safety of Phnom Penh. In subsequent years, the training of civilian policemen were improved in newer UN peacekeeping operations.

It can be said now that postwar pacifism in Japan tended to be a “one country pacifism,” with a limited understanding of vulnerabilities of UN peacekeeping in Africa, the Middle East, and in parts of Asia. But we are faced with a constant need to make UN global efforts for peacekeeping and peacebuilding more effective and safer through constant endeavors by all of us concerned.