

Rescue

Volunteers' services wasted by bureaucratic red tape

By CAMERON HAY

On Jan. 21, nongovernmental organizations met at the Sannomiya YMCA to coordinate their relief efforts for quake victims. While thousands of people had contacted the Kobe Municipal Government to offer their services as volunteers, human resources were being wasted by a government system unused to harnessing the efforts of individuals in an emergency.

On the previous night, for example, two woman volunteers arrived at the municipal government building to plead for 10 more volunteers to help carry water at the Kobe Citizens Central Hospital on Port Island. Exhausted nurses were being diverted from their medical duties to haul water from trucks to the hospital, one woman said. Although a registry on the eighth floor of the municipal government holds the names of 5,000 people eager to volunteer, officials on the first floor turned the women away.

Motozo Takebe, in charge of volunteer registration at the municipal government, said the hospital itself must first contact the municipal government's public health department, which then arranges for volunteers.

On a different problem, the two women said they were asked by city government officials to present their request in writing. Since they planned to spend the next day carrying water, the matter would be delayed a full 24 hours.

People involved in relief efforts here are learning that traditional bureaucratic responses are inadequate in an emergency.

"They like paperwork. They are in a big organization, so they are used to doing things in this bureaucratic way," said one of the women, who walked in from Kyoto earlier in the week to offer her services.



Evacuees help themselves to food at a makeshift outdoor kitchen KYODO



Lining up for food KIMIO IIDA

Scott Sibbald, an American staff member at the YMCA, said that he and a group of non-Japanese residents approached firefighters on the day of the quake offering to help.

"We were willing to do anything. Help dig people out. There's still people buried now. But no one knew what to do with us, how to deal with individual volunteers, especially foreigners," Sibbald said. "There was no leadership. They need to call in the army to take charge."

By Jan. 21, Sibbald and other volunteers

were using bicycles and motorbikes to ferry water and food from the Nagata YMCA to refugees in the area.

"A lot of places can't be reached by four-wheeled vehicles because of rubble and fallen buildings, so we're getting out to them on bikes," he said.

Xu Yemeng, a 20-year-old from China who has been studying Japanese at the YMCA for the last three months, said he would join relief efforts for a few days before returning to Shanghai.

"My house in Hyogo Ward burned down, and all I've got are these clothes, well some of them are borrowed actually, and my passport. No money. I'll go back to Shanghai to buy some clothes and things, then come back here, because I think Kobe needs help," Xu said.

Representatives of the YMCA, Peace and Health and Human Development, the United Church of Christ in Japan and the Kansai NGO Council agreed to set up a system to coordinate volunteer efforts, sharing information about where problems and resources are, and on methods for solving problems.

They are not the only NGOs working to help. About 10 large loudspeaker trucks from rightist groups pulled up on National Route 2 in Sannomiya and distributed water, instant noodles and other relief goods while serving hot tea to quake victims. The rightists, in military uniforms, declined to comment. Their vehicles carried Chubu license plates.