Situation of Homeless People in Japan

Kogure Yasuhisa

In regency, Jesuit Social Center
*Cooking for the Homeless in Shibuya*

Every Saturday evening a group of more than 30 homeless and volunteers gather together to prepare food for people living in the streets. Although nobody takes the initiative the preparations proceed smoothly, step by step. The food is prepared within a peaceful atmosphere for about 160 people every time. This is, usually, a spectacle of the group "Nojiren" in Shibuya and the Mitake public park. The cooking goes steadily on, every week, no matter a typhoon comes or snow falls down. This is because to eat is an important reality for the homeless companions and everybody is conscious of that. Consequently, many come to participate in the cooking together. People feel naturally joy by doing something together. Cutting vegetables or washing pots, people tell jokes and old stories. That way, facing each other, little by little, human relations are mutually built.

The first time I visited the Mitake Park was in the year 2000, before entering the Jesuits. It is about 8 years ago. Later, I was unable to show up and during these 8 years old companions disappeared and new ones came in, but there was no change in the continuation of cooking together for people living in the street. Nevertheless, I feel that the basic situation of homeless people had not changed during the last 8 years.

What has really changed? What is remaining the same? I want to think about it, by offering some concrete cases of homeless people living in the street now.

*A spectacle of the cooking in Shibuya Mitake Public Park*

*Special legislation regarding the homeless and its social results*

While I was in the Jesuit Novitiate in Hiroshima I accustomed to participate, once a week, in the patrolling activities of a local organization. It was at the time of a new legislation (July 2002) that was supposed to assist homeless people to become independent and in order to implement it, a national survey was taken (January 2003). In fact, I helped with the hearing of the survey in Hiroshima, under the responsibility of the group working with the homeless.

In reference to the above mentioned legislation, time before the legislation became
into effect, there were great discussions with regard to the pros and cons among homeless organizations and their supporters, especially concerning the problematic issues involved.

There are mainly three issues to be considered:

1. The new legislation avoids reference to the government's responsibility with regard to employment, main cause of homelessness, and looks for answers only from the point of view of "getting out from the street." In order to accomplish it, the self-responsibility of the homeless and their self-efforts are stressed. Such legislation imposes arbitrary independence on them.

2. By homeless, it is understood those persons sleeping and living in parks and along the rivers, in other words, "homeless resident in tents." As a result, "non-resident homeless," for instance, the "moving-type ones" that carrying carton boxes change locations to sleep at night are in danger of not meeting the legal conditions of homelessness and thus are not covered by policies and activities meant to support homeless people. On the other hand, those persons that could come into a broader definition of "homeless," like people that have been accepted as daily workers and live in temporary shelters, and again, daily workers living in cheap resting houses or the new type of young people sent daily to different job sites but spending the nights in "net-coffee shops," and that could easily fall any time into a homeless situation, all such persons are kept totally in the dark in the new legislation. As a result, the problems concerning the homeless become all divided and there is a danger that the answer to unemployment and labor issues, the basic causes of homelessness are left out without a definite answer.

3. According to article 11 on a fair solution, the administration authorities managing the public parks have the duty to take the necessary steps (compulsory evictions) to impose a reasonable use of public facilities in combination with rehabilitation centers and shelters that promote self-assistance independence.

The especial legislation regarding the homeless was implemented 5 years ago, in 2002. This legislation has a 10-year time limit and consequently expires at the end of this 2007 fiscal year, when a 'revision' has to take place. A number of homeless organizations point out the problems of the actual legislation and are demanding its total basic revision. In fact, the problems involved in this legislation have become a reality during the last 5 years, with regard to the concrete policies that have been set later concerning local official organizations and their implementation.

*Case Study in Tokyo (1) Activities of Self-support Centers*

To begin with Tokyo, the problem of homeless visibly appeared in Tokyo (the underground of the West exit of Shinjuku Station: the carton boxes n.4 village), ahead of other regions, as a result of the business slump brought about after the collapse of the bubble economy, in 1993. Municipal Tokyo, before the legislation about the homeless was fixed, had experienced concrete steps to establish "policies for people living in the streets," like compulsory evictions (1996), self retire after the fire of 1998, opening of a provisional center in Kitashinjuku, the self-support center (2000) and the
temporary urgent shelters in the year 2001.

Temporary urgent shelters built one after the other starting 2001 were: Ota, Itabashi, Edogawa, Arakawa and Chiyoda Residences. The Ota Residence is closed at present, but a new one has been built in Setagaya. Their full capacity is for 454 persons. People of the 23 wards that live out in the streets are temporarily taken care of and receive rehabilitation sessions. The centers run surveys of the residents in order to perform better services to the homeless, by getting acquainted with their real situations and assess at the same time the programs they are implementing. As a rule, people are allowed to stay in the centers for a month, receiving their daily food, clothing and necessary daily goods. The centers do not provide them with cash, but they offer other goods, like tobacco also. As for the assessment, it means that they look into the issue of watching whether the homeless can really use the self-support centers built for them.

The self-support assistant centers were started in the year 2000 with the Taito and Shinjuku Residences, followed by Toshima, Sumida (2001) and Shibuya (2002). Four have been closed and there remain 5 centers (Shibuya, Kita, Chuo, Suginami and Katsushika) open. Their capacity is of about 326 persons. As a rule and as a result of the assessment done at the temporary urgent shelters, they are built to implement self-assistance programs in three main fields: life, job and social life assistance for expected users that staying at the self-support centers could be able to look for jobs by themselves. There is a 2-month limit for the use of those facilities and only once can be used. In other words, they are only given one chance and that means "I provide you with a roof and within 2 months do your best to find a job." In case they cannot find a job within 2 months they must get out of the residence. Where to go? The street is the only place available.

Well, "unemployment" is the cause of homelessness and, actually, the average age of the homeless companions forced to live in the streets is around 60-year-old. Confronted with this reality is easy to imagine how difficult would it be to find a common every day job that could provide them with sufficient income to afford the rent of an apartment. Only by the private efforts of those workers that do not have any reliable person around, self-reliance could not be an answer. It is clear that unless the structural labor and social problems involved are solved there are no basic solutions.

The Tokyo municipal Welfare and Health department that functions as the body to implement official policies for the whole self-assistance system of homeless people exists, in fact, as an organization that takes care of only one part of them, i.e. "young people who, relatively, have the capacity to find new jobs." Tokyo City also recognizes that residents of self-assistance centers able to find jobs cannot enjoy a very stable situation afterwards.

Use for a while your imagination.

"Suppose that you are living homeless in a park or under a bridge. Since you were young you accustomed to work as temporary construction worker, but you reached 60 years and nobody cares to employ you. The only income you have comes from the selling of aluminum cans. Now, to be able to sell them you must find a place to stock
them and, at present, you only have a corner in a public park. There is, practically, not a single day when you could afford 3 meals, but you can go on, somehow, living day after day. Welfare officials advise you to use the "self-assistance center," but since you do not have any temporary daily job, even if you enter the center, at your age it will be totally impossible to find any ordinary job. Now, suppose that you enter the temporary and the self-support centers. Your tent in the park and the space to keep your aluminum cans there will be dismantled, following the stipulations of the new legislation and a fence will be set up so that you will not be able to bring your tent there anymore. You try to do your best, but you cannot find any job and after a period of three months you are told to leave the center and since you lost the basis you had before in the park you will not be able to eat selling cans as before. How to survive from now on?"

This is the reality and the main reason why a majority of the homeless people do not have any expectations on using the self-support facilities.

On top of that, it should be noticed that the above legislation and the policies taken by the local administration, like the centers established, are being used as breakwater walls to apply for social welfare of homeless people. The legislation concerning social welfare is basically equal without discrimination. It claims: "you are a homeless person, thus you should enter the temporary urgent shelters." This explanation is clearly illegal. In this respect, at the end of last year, a persistent collective negotiation with Welfare centers, by homeless groups, from Sanya and Sumida and at the beginning of this year, from Shibuya, took place in order to apply for social welfare, from the street. They achieved some good results.

*Case study in Tokyo (2) Homeless people left out of the program*

Tokyo Municipal City started another different program, "The ¥3,000 apartment program" besides the above mentioned centers, in the year 2004. Homeless living in tents of 5 public parks (Toyama, Yoyogi, Ueno, Shinjuku Central and Sumida) were selected and cheap apartment housing (¥3,000 monthly rent) together with job
opportunities were offered only to them, in order to help them to live by themselves. But, why only those ones were selected? Homeless people without a tent who change every night a different site to sleep, bringing always along carton boxes, live in very difficult situations, but are left out from such official programs.

Why that? The only answer is that the ¥3,000 apartment program has a definite clear purpose: to reduce the numbers of people living in tents. On one hand, welfare authorities claim that everybody is free to accept the program or to reject it, but the tents of those who refuse to enter the apartment are usually in danger of been also removed. The voices of people living in tents at both sides of Sumida River or in Yoyogi Park send a clear message we also believe is right: "Why homeless without tents are excluded from the program? Why those living in tents are left out if they do not agree with the program?"

The special legislation on homeless addresses only the "established people living in tents" and the true aim of proper steps to implement the laws is not to help to remedy the very rigid situation where homeless people have to survive, but to totally remove from parks and other visible sites tents and carton boxes where the homeless are living. Municipal Tokyo officially declares on its Web that the policies regarding the ¥3,000 apartment program and the prohibition to enter again parks to live there have the same purpose.

The cheap apartment program has already entered its 3rd phase and it has become very clear that the attitude is, first, to clean all public parks and to abstain from any service to homeless people on the move and without tents.

*Impossibility of Survival: Homeless Evicted from the Underground of Shibuya Station

If tents and carton boxes disappear from our sight people will simply believe that the numbers of homeless have decreased. Nevertheless, groups of people on the move, without tents, continue existing and those that enter terrible temporary shelter in construction site or other cheap facilities run by NPO groups, called "business exploiting the poor" that suck welfare funds, live "invisibly" around us.

The situation of the so called "homeless on the move" is really terrible. The only last occupation left to them to remain alive, a tent and the gathering of cans is not allowed to them, they are left out of the programs resulting from the new legislation on the homeless, the social mood works against them and cornered without a place and means to survive and they are faced with, literally, danger of dying a beggar.

Try to imagine it.
"You don't have a place in a park anymore. You have to move from place to place bringing along all your belongings. Since, usually, you have to be careful about how to dress, at noon time you walk around carrying your bag and whenever you sit down on a bench of a shopping area, people, maybe, do not realize that you are a 'homeless.' Nevertheless, when night comes you search around for a place to sleep. Since you don't have a tent, there is no way to lie down peacefully for a few hours. If you compare that to the times when you were living in a tent your body would hardly bear it. You become
extremely tired. The situation is like this: at 10 o'clock in the evening, the shopping centers under the stations close and from that time till 12 o'clock when the shutters at the entrance of the stations close down, you have only 2 hours to find some warm location to rest. The guard, you never have met, comes towards you to tell you that the cleaning staff will come and that, following the anti-terrorist regulations, you cannot rest there anymore. They will call the police in case you refuse to leave the place. Thus, you have to go outside to the cold winter streets. The only opportunity you have a day to lie down and rest in a warm place for just 2 hours is taken away. You are tired and outside is cold. Will you survive?

This is not just imagination. Last December 2, in the middle of a very cold winter night, this was a reality that happened at the underground of Shibuya Station. Tokyu Dentetsu (Tokyu Corporation) evicted homeless people from the Station and a public protest criticized the company: "Go to hell those who without notice evict people and send them to the cold winter streets!" Nojiren and similar homeless groups, from Sanya and Sumida, national homeless organizations and their supporters' groups and private persons, together with others from Korea, France and the Philippines joined to protest against the evictions.

The situation is still quite fluid. In fact, one of the evicted homeless, a 60-year-old male person died frozen at night on the street. According to a companion homeless he had moved to Shibuya a few days before and when he was removed from the station did not know where to go and loitering around died where he tried to sleep. That was what was feared it might happen. "Homeless on the move" are continually ejected from all places and, totally unaware, die a beggar. Since they are not under a tent or a carton box go around unnoticed and give the impression that this homelessness has been solved, but in reality the tragedy goes on unsolved.

*Homelessness is a Structural Issue*

Last December Tokyo Municipal City stated that will start in April of 2008 a new Program for those unstable workers that lost their homes. What do officials mean by that? The normal interpretation would be homeless people, as far as I can understand.
Tokyo officials give the following definition: "By unstable workers that have lost their homes it is meant those staying in Internet cafe or similar shops with comics that go from there to unstable jobs." Homeless barely seem to differ from those. But, such people in the West are literally counted as homeless. Thus, Japan, in contrast to the West, releases quite small numbers of homeless people, based on the above official definition. Such statements are just pure lies. On the opposite, compared to other industrial countries' major cities, there is no city in the world that has as many people living in the street as Tokyo City. In case Tokyo officials were to explain the new Program to be implemented from April 2008 what explanation will they give? Will they be saying that people to be covered by that Program are not homeless?

Since they stick to a narrow definition of homelessness limiting it to people living in the street, tacitly try to spread around the message that "homelessness has not any structural background: it is just an issue affecting only some special people." Homelessness is the result of "poverty" that includes unemployment and labor problems, it is an issue of social structures. There is no basic difference between homeless people and "net cafe" displaced persons.

As a result of a problematic revision of legislation concerning the dispatch of workers to other companies, work environment has reached very low levels and the actual numbers of non-regular workers, a majority of them young, has exceeded 16 million. Most of them are underpaid and living in an unstable situation. The problems are not visible yet, because people think that "they are still young and have families supporting them," but if they remain single and grow of age, nobody could know what would happen to them. During the 90s, former daily workers that were of old age already had to get out from labor shelters to live in the streets and the same situation is getting now more serious. Would I be mistaken to entertain such fear? The visible trends of new liberalism started to be felt after 1998 and the rapid increase in suicide cases are, by no means, unrelated. Poverty is spreading out. Poverty drives people to the streets or to commit suicide. People cannot survive! More than half of young people have been pushed down to a social system where there is no hope to hold a stable regular job. Thus, they do not see any future.

<Shibuya Miyashita Public Park>