

# JAPAN SELF-DEFENSE FORCES BRING COMFORT TO DISASTER VICTIMS

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Bathing support sets like this take a team of six people about three hours to construct, and the latest models are equipped with amenities like massaging shower heads

*The Japan Self-Defense Forces play many roles in disaster areas: saving lives, supplying water and food, transferring necessary supplies and more. Among their many tasks, the one that provides immense comfort to disaster victims and earns the most vocal appreciation is bathing support.*

WHEN basic services stop due to major disasters, victims in the devastated areas suffer many inconveniences and indignities. The lack of clean water, food, bathrooms, proper sleeping spaces and bathing facilities causes great stress. To ease those difficult living conditions, the Japan Ground Self-Defense Force (JGSDF) offers bathing support services upon request from local government in affected areas.

According to Major Masakazu Hashimoto of the JGSDF public relations office, bathing support was

first supplied in the areas that were affected when the Isahaya Flood—which killed over seven hundred people—struck in 1957. Since then, JGSDF Logistical Support Regiments have been equipped with outdoor bathing sets and can offer baths in disaster areas whenever needed. Water supplied from local reservoirs is prepared using the JGSDF's water purification system. A specialized boiler is used to heat the water for baths, which are set near sewers so the water can be drained through pipes made out of tent fabric. In most cases, the baths are situated in schools or parking lots of local government facilities used as evacuation spots.

The Nerima Camp in Tokyo has one of these outdoor bath sets. The tent has a changing room, five showers, space for washing, and a massive bath filled with 3.7 tons of hot water kept at 41 to 42 degrees Celsius. The entrance features a *noren* fabric curtain and flags with Nerima-no-Yu (Nerima Bath) written on it to give it a bathhouse-like feel.

Major Ryosuke Izumi, leader of the First Logistic Support Regiment, says: "When it gets crowded we can adjust things like bathing times depending on



The tank on the right can hold about ten tons of water. The trailer on the left is equipped with a power generator, a boiler and a water pump

gender ratios and numbers, or increase the lighting and add additional showers. Depending on needs we can also offer support for the elderly and infants by adding steps and handrails to the baths as well.” The *noren* and flags differ depending on where each regiment is based. Including this location name or nods to local specialties allow people to tell which self-defense team is offering support.

“We try our best to ensure that people feel as comfortable as possible in our care,” says Tetsuya Umino, a First Lieutenant and platoon leader. “We remove hair and dirt from the baths, supply clean, hot water, and prepare shampoo and soap with the help of local governments. In the changing rooms, we use fast-drying diatomite bathmats and mop the space from time to time to keep it dry. In certain cases, we provide lockers for valuables, baths for infants, and waiting rooms for families.”

The smiles and thank-you cards from users are the greatest motivational boost for the self-defense



Leader of the First Logistical Support Regiment Major Ryosuke Izumi (left) and First Lieutenant and platoon leader Tetsuya Umino (right)



Keeping the baths clean and providing proper supplies is an important part of providing bathing support



Thank-you cards from children are great for the morale of the Japan Self-Defense Force members providing bathing support

officials providing this bathing support. “I was pleased to receive comments like ‘I felt so revived,’ ‘My child smiled again,’ and ‘I felt so relaxed,’” Major Izumi states. “Depending on the needs of the local government, we will continue to offer bathing support when disasters occur. We love to help people feel clean, and to offer assistance and hope through our care.”

Military groups outside of Japan do offer bathing support in disaster areas, but they tend to be shower booths in simple containers. Massive baths like those the Japan Ground Self-Defense Force provides are unheard of.

Keeping this essential part of Japanese culture alive for people in dire situations shows the dedication of the men and women of the Japan Ground Self-Defense Force to those they serve. 17



The *noren* curtains change depending on where each regiment is based. From the top there's the "Nerima-no-Yu" curtain from the North Eastern Army 1st Division Logistic Support Regiment, the "Yamagata Hanagasa-no-Yu" curtain from the North Eastern Army 6th Division Logistic Support Regiment and the "Kyou-no-Yu" curtain from the Middle Army Logistics Regiment