Arabian nights are hot!

The situation of civil engineering in the Mideast/Persian Gulf region

What can we contribute?

3. Lessons that Japanese engineers should learn:

Survival in the Arab world

Katsumi TAMURA
Full member of JSCE
Project Director, Civil Engineering Department, International Civil Engineering Division, International Operations Headquarters, Taisei Corporation

Working in the Arab world

In the United Arab Emirates, where I work, more than half of the people working for clients and consulting firms are foreigners. Many of the people assisting the UAE citizens in top management posts are Syrian Arabs and Lebanese. These people are extremely cautious and tend to be suspicious of others, and they can be formidable as opponents. Perhaps it is because of this nature that they tend to demand perfection in everything. Negotiating with them is generally difficult, as they have a very good command of the English language and a high level of specialized knowledge. In fact, it is a rare occurrence for negotiations to proceed smoothly.

In most cases, design standards are based on either the British Standards (BS) or standards of the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (AASHTO). Of course, it is necessary to have an exceedingly thorough understanding of these standards in order to avoid encountering difficulties not only at the design stage but also during on-site management. In the case of a design and construction project, in particular, it is often necessary to expend enormous amounts of effort and time in order to obtain approval for the design and materials.

Photograph 1. The manmade island of Palm Jumeira and an undersea road tunnel, currently under construction (middle to bottom right).

Photograph 2. Work on the undersea road tunnel.

There is a great deal of personnel turnover in Dubai. This includes frequent replacements

among the staff of clients, consultants, contractors, and subcontractors. Someone who was a subordinate until yesterday can become the client's representative tomorrow; a trusted contact at a consulting firm may suddenly be switched to another project; or a subcontractor's staff member can be hired by a consulting firm. I could give many more examples. This kind of turnover as an everyday occurrence does not facilitate smooth project implementation.

What Japanese engineers should learn

A wide variety of people are involved in projects here, including Europeans, Americans, Syrian Arabs, Lebanese, Egyptians, Indians, and Pakistanis. English is the common language of communication, and a wide variety of accents and nonstandard uses of the English language are heard flying back and forth at meetings. We need to be able to correctly understand all varieties of English, as well as to accurately convey our thoughts to others.

It is necessary to have a thorough understanding of the standards regarding design and materials, extending to the specific details referenced by those standards. Otherwise, some detail may be pinpointed at the final stage of approval, resulting in a rejection.

In itself, the basic procedure for projects here is not much different than other overseas projects. However, clients and consulting firms are particularly sensitive to schedule delays. If a delay occurs, the contractor may be held completely liable unless it conducts a detailed analysis and explains the legitimacy of the delay. When something occurs that could significantly affect the schedule, it is necessary to accurately gauge its impact and submit a report in all such instances.

To survive in the Arab world

I have been working in UAE for about four years. During this time, there has been no change in the friendly attitude which UAE citizens working in government agencies and the top management of businesses have shown to the Japanese. However, the engineers from other Arab nations who assist them are quite difficult to deal with. To negotiate with them, an attitude of perseverance is needed, in addition to detailed knowledge of the matters in question. In this country, even if one is fed up with their stubbornness, it is necessary to have the mental fortitude to negotiate with a smile, drawing them in with a tolerant attitude. Building a good relationship with these people is the key to success for projects in this country.

Photograph 3. A discussion with project members of various nationalities.

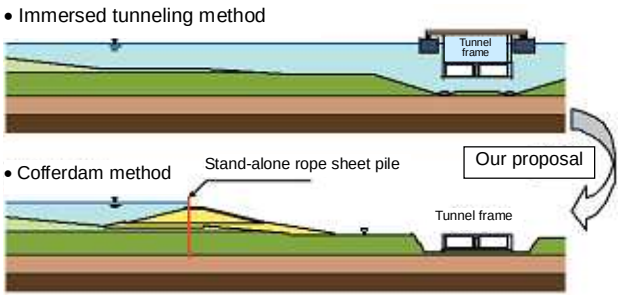

Fig. 1. Technical proposal

Meanwhile, in development and other projects, there is a growing trend toward unified orders that include both design and construction. In the past, Dubai's existing construction companies have generally handled construction only. Japanese firms

are at an advantage, since they can use their expertise in design and construction to devise proposals that provide clients with advantages such as faster completion times. One example of this is the project I am currently working on. This is a project to design and build a 1.4-kilometer undersea road tunnel linking manmade islands, part of a resort development called Palm Island. In the competitive bidding for this project, the client selected Taisei not only for its competitive pricing, but also for the strength of its technical proposal (Fig. 1). For Dubai City Hall as well, there is a move to actively incorporate the latest technologies and innovative ideas. I believe that there are growing opportunities for Japanese engineers to make use of their knowledge and expertise in selling their comprehensive technical strengths.

In the Persian Gulf region of the Arabian peninsula, national politics are controlled by a king or emir. Their orders are absolute, and the will of top administrators is reflected directly in national policy. In fact, Dubai in its entirety has been compared to a single government-owned company and nicknamed "Dubai Inc." It is administered in a top-down, absolute manner. The aspect emphasized most is that of speed and a rapid response. Only the people and companies who can adapt to this pace are assured of an opportunity to work here.