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Sadako Ogata

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Sadako Ogata, UN High Commissioner for Refugees, 1927-2019

She turned the agency into a diplomatic and moral force



Former UN High Commissioner for Refugees Sadako Ogata meeting refugees from Myanmar in 2000 © Jason Reed/Reuters

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Sadako Ogata was the only Japanese and first woman to run the UN Refugee Agency, which she did with a determination and vision that greatly expanded the concept of international relief.

She is best known for the decade, from early 1991 to late 2000, that she served as UN High Commissioner at a time of great global conflict, from Africa and south-east Asia to the Balkans, when those fleeing strife were most in need of help.

Most notably, prompted by what happened to [Iraqi Kurds](#) in the first Gulf war, Ogata, who has died in Tokyo at the age of 92, extended UNHCR's operations to include assistance for the internally displaced as well as to those crossing national borders. She had no qualms about taking on governments — even her own nominal bosses at the UN — whenever they frustrated her humanitarian efforts.

She transformed the communications role of the agency and, more generally, turned it into a diplomatic and moral force, in a departure from its traditional legal protection services.

Soon after taking office, she commissioned the landmark [State of the World's Refugees](#) report, which brought home to a global audience the magnitude of the problems the world was facing.

She also inspired a greater awareness in Japan, particularly among the younger generation, of humanitarian needs and the country's international obligations — although this did not always result in much action.

For a Japanese woman of her generation, she was much indebted to supportive parents and to her husband, [Shijuro Ogata](#), a former deputy governor for international affairs at the Bank of Japan, who died in 2014. Together they had a son and daughter who survive her.



Ogata in 2015. She was far from idle after her 10 years at UNHCR, holding cabinet-level positions and writing a memoir © Thomas Peter/Reuters

Sadako Nakamura was born in Tokyo on September 16 1927 into a diplomatic family. Her father's postings took her to the US, China and Hong Kong where he ensured that she learnt English. She graduated from the University of the Sacred Heart in Tokyo and later acquired advanced degrees from Georgetown and Berkeley.

She chose academia as a career, becoming a professor of international politics and later a dean at Sophia University, because women were not exactly welcomed in the Japanese foreign service — and certainly not a mother with two young children.

But Ogata's expertise in international relations (and her command of English) found her appointed to various UN bodies, including its Commission on Human Rights,

where she worked on refugee issues in Cambodia and Myanmar, and as chair of the executive board of Unicef, the worldwide agency for children in need.

Still, although she came from a liberal background, she was studiously apolitical in Tokyo, which meant that she lacked the domestic sponsors who might have pushed her name forward when the UNHCR post became vacant. The standard Japanese practice with international appointments was not to propose its best and brightest but invariably a senior, but not necessarily distinguished, bureaucrat near the end of their career.



Ogata visiting Afghanistan in 2002. She was the first woman to run UNHCR © Erik de Castro/Reuters

As it turned out, she did not need them. A skilful lobbying campaign on her behalf was conducted by Robert Cooper, the Japanophile at the British Foreign Office, and a young diplomat at the Japanese embassy in London, supported by the US government. She always credited a column I wrote in the Financial Times with winning her the job: I said she was eminently qualified for the post and it appeared the week before she was confirmed — but the die had already been cast by others.

Ogata was not exactly idle after her 10 years at UNHCR. In 2002, Junichiro Koizumi, then Japanese prime minister, offered her the job of foreign minister, but she declined.

Nevertheless, back in Tokyo she held cabinet-level positions covering foreign aid and Afghanistan. She wrote a memoir of [her life and times](#) — and never forgot the refugees she had tried to help. Of her own country's unwillingness to admit all but a handful, she said in a Japanese newspaper interview three years ago, "If Japan doesn't open a door for people with particular reasons and needs, it's against human rights."

Yet she was never an all-work-all-the-time crusader. Ogata played decent tennis, took up golf while based in Geneva and liked nothing more than a stiff Scotch whisky when

the day was done. As she often said, “I happen to be Japanese, that’s all.” It was a privilege to know her.

Jurek Martin

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