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Sadako Ogata

Sadako Ogata worked on some of the largest crises of the decade during her time in service from 1991 to 2000. Challenges included helping Kurdish refugees fleeing from Iraq after the 1991 Gulf War, and others from the Balkans War. She was known for her great passion in working to protect the “defenseless and dispossessed.”

She was well respected by the United Nations staff and world leaders alike, and was described by her colleagues as a “five-foot giant” for her formidable negotiating skills and ability to confront hostile factions.

In 1991, she became the first woman, the first Japanese person, and the first academic to be installed as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Within weeks of starting her job, she was faced with one of the biggest crises of the 1990s – millions of Kurdish refugees had fled to Iran after the Gulf War. “I didn’t really know what I was getting into, because what happened after I took up the office was very different from what everyone assumed would happen in the world,” she told the Japan Times in 2005.

In 1995, she was awarded the Philadelphia Liberty Medal, an annual award given by the National Constitution Centre of the US, which recognizes “leadership in the pursuit of freedom”. “There is no greater champion and activist on behalf of the refugees of the world than Mrs. Ogata,” the National Constitution Centre said.

“I have often been asked from where I draw my energy,” she said in a 2015 article with the UN. “I often think of all the refugees whom I met in camps, in villages, in reception centers, in shantytowns.” “I believe that what has kept me going is the conviction that our collective efforts can turn the terror and pain of exile into the safety and unity of family and friends.”

(305Words)