President Chen Shui-bian’s inaugural address fired the Taiwanese people with enthusiasm and tapped into a deep-running current in Taiwanese society. The impetus to participate, to volunteer, to reach out and help their neighbors has long been a hallmark of Taiwan’s people. This is true not only at home in Taiwanese communities, but also abroad, in Taiwan’s interaction with the world community. From its earliest years, the Republic of China has been a leader in providing generous assistance to developing countries around the world. The ICDF now carries the torch of this assistance, and the organization is currently receiving an infusion of fresh “spirit” from the Taiwanese people. The addition of 19 new members to the ICDF Volunteers program, and the first 37 Taiwanese conscripts participating in the nation’s recently inaugurated Diplomatic Alternative Service program will inject new energy and professionalism into overseas ICDF technical missions.
Providing overseas ICDF technical missions with dedicated, qualified personnel is no easy task. Not only must mission members be trained in one or more advanced disciplines (agriculture, aquaculture, water conservation, animal husbandry, information technology, education, medical services, and others), they must also be gifted in language acquisition, and, perhaps most important, they must be resilient and resourceful, required as they are to frequently work in difficult situations and austere environments. Standards are so high and the need for personnel so keen that the potential for shortages in ROC aid projects and programs is always part of ICDF planning. Further, generational and professional turnover naturally impacts the staff of overseas missions. The two programs providing the current infusion of talent into ICDF overseas technical missions—the ICDF Volunteers and the Diplomatic Alternative Service program—alleviate much of the concern about potential personnel shortages while meeting the ICDF’s high standards.

The ICDF salutes the volunteers taking part in the ICDF Volunteers Program in 2001, the United Nations International Year of Volunteers. With their professional and semi-professional skills, global perspective, passion for their work, and enterprising personalities, ICDF volunteers have long been a valuable addition to ICDF projects and programs. Further, these men and women do not lack courage, as they willingly take on challenging positions in demanding environments in lands far away from their homes. The ICDF was fortunate in August of this year to have no less than 200 applicants for the 19 available volunteer positions. The 19 new volunteers have been selected, and are receiving their training before being assigned to Costa Rica, Panama, Nicaragua, São Tomé and Principe, St. Vincent and Vietnam.

ICDF volunteers have been contributing to the nation’s overseas development efforts for many years—78 total have been selected from 1997–2001. The program was organized in July 1993 by the ICDF’s predecessor, the International Economic Cooperation Development Fund (IECDF). On July 1, 1996, the IECDF was reorganized and renamed the International Cooperation and Development Fund, and the IECDF Volunteers became the current organization, the ICDF Volunteers.

ICDF volunteers have played a significant role in contributing to the promotion of world progress and prosperity, assisting developing nations with economic and educational development, and expanding the ROC’s foreign aid operations. ICDF volunteers work directly with the people of host countries, which not only benefits the countries, but also provides a deeper understanding of their culture and traditions to the volunteers. Through this program, ICDF volunteers have developed long-lasting friendships and have brought their experiences and broadened perspectives back to Taiwan when they return home.
The countries to which the ICDF Volunteers are dispatched include developing nations with formal diplomatic relations with the ROC (such as Costa Rica, Panama, São Tomé and Principe, Nicaragua and St. Vincent), as well as other developing countries whose governments, despite the absence of diplomatic relations with the ROC, wish to cooperate in economic development and the upgrade of substantive bilateral relations (such as Thailand, Myanmar and Vietnam). All undertakings that can contribute to improving the recipient country’s development are within the scope of the ICDF Volunteers, including social services, educational assistance, economic activities, vocational training, and rural development.

Volunteer recruitment is undertaken once a year. During July and August of this year, the ICDF headquarters was busy with activity as 200 new applicants arrived for written and oral tests to gauge their language and technical qualifications, and interviews to probe their aptitude and adaptability for service abroad. After their selection, the recruits begin an intensive training program. This training includes pre-service training in Taiwan, during which volunteers hone their language and technical abilities, increase their understanding of volunteer services and the ICDF Volunteers’ ideals, enlarge their knowledge of the countries to which they will be dispatched, and learn essential survival techniques. Further training and instruction are held in host countries, where volunteers receive thorough orientation on culture and national traditions, and intensive language instruction from native speakers. From there, the volunteers begin their two-year stints, which have proven to be the “experience of a lifetime” for virtually all ICDF volunteers.
In order to address practical considerations due to personnel reductions in Taiwan’s armed forces, Taiwan’s Ministry of the Interior (under which the Department of Conscription functions) began studying the feasibility of domestic alternatives to military service in 1996. It was and still is believed that even though force reductions are inevitable, the requirement that adult male Taiwanese citizens contribute to their nation’s security and well-being should not be abandoned (two years of military service are mandatory for Taiwanese men after the age of 18). Taiwan’s government began to plan, and the Domestic Alternative Service program was enacted into law in January 2000. In September 2000, the first 1,800 recruits in the program began their training, before being assigned to Taiwanese social, community service, law enforcement, firefighting, and environmental agencies.

While this new program proved an instant success, President Chen Shui-bian and his aides gave it a new slant in August 2000. Upon his return from a diplomatic tour of Central America and Africa, President Chen led a group of lawmakers and foreign service specialists in advocating enlarging Taiwan’s Domestic Alternative Service program to include overseas, diplomatic alternatives. Beyond the continuing practical necessity of finding productive national duties for draft-age Taiwanese men, President Chen’s government thoughtfully foresaw that a new “peace corps” of overseas workers would bolster the nation’s overseas technical missions—which form one of the pillars of ROC diplomacy. The Taiwanese people, government agencies and the ICDF eagerly embraced Chen’s suggestion and work was soon launched on the new program. Chen’s administration appraised the proposed policy in late 2000, and shortly thereafter approved the Diplomatic Alternative Service program, which was put into motion in early 2001.

During the first stage of the program, Taiwan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs has given preference to participants with education or experience in agriculture and fisheries, water conservation, medical services, vocational training, trade and commercial activities, and information systems—all areas the ICDF focuses...
on in its cooperation projects and technical missions around the world. Later, as the project grows and is refined, the range will be broadened to include conscripts with expertise in foreign languages and international relations. By 2002, the nation plans to assign selected recruits to work in ROC embassies, advancing Taiwan’s own brand of “people’s diplomacy.” The program hearkens not only to President Chen’s comment on the spirit of a “volunteer Taiwan,” but also to Taiwan Minister of Foreign Affairs Tien Hung-mao’s “three principles of the people,” one of which is the necessity of civilian sector participation in ROC governmental affairs.

With the first group of 37 ROC conscripts’ completion of basic training in August, the ICDF has assumed its role in the Diplomatic Alternative Service program. Into November 2001, the ICDF will conduct specialized technical and language training (long ICDF specialties). The program will also include the study of diplomatic policies, international cooperation issues, and foreign assistance techniques, in order to strengthen recruits’ understanding of their roles in the broader context of ICDF technical mission work. In addition to this academic, language and technical training, the ICDF will probe recruits’ adaptability to service abroad, explicate the national profiles and cultures of the countries to which they will be dispatched, and impart survival, health and first aid skills. After their training, the first group of conscripts will be dispatched to technical missions in Africa, Central and South America and the Asia Pacific region. The conscripts will contribute to a range of ICDF activities, including agricultural/aquacultural, educational, medical and social services projects. When their experience and expertise are deemed adequate, they will take on more responsible positions in ICDF missions, and it is hoped that many will choose to work longer-term, as technicians, specialists and even mission leaders.

**Prospects for the Future**

The creation of a large, well-organized civilian volunteer group and a Diplomatic Alternative Service were landmarks in Taiwan’s diplomatic history and the ICDF’s international development efforts. There are now approximately 300 dedicated agricultural, animal husbandry, medical, information technology and commercial specialists and technicians working in 40 ICDF technical missions in 33 countries, but as noted there will always be a measure of expected turnover and the need for new talent and vitality. The 19 new ICDF volunteers and the 37 conscripts in the Diplomatic Alternative Service program will assuredly contribute this and more. These dutiful young men and women will form the foundation of this productive and peaceful use of Taiwanese human resources, supplying ICDF missions around the world with expertise and fresh enthusiasm, and paving the way for the volunteers and conscripts who come after them in coming months and years.

The Taiwanese press showed great interest in the launch of the Diplomatic Alternative Service program.