

Please support Bangladesh, we need it now

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By *Dr. Ahsan H. Mansur*

The friendship of Japan is now more important than ever



Japan and Bangladesh must stand shoulder to shoulder. Photo- REUTERS

Bangladesh remains in shock following the terrorist attack on Holey Bakery on July 1, that saw 20 hostages including nine Italians and seven Japanese being brutally murdered.

A country that has been perceived internationally, and also domestically, as a moderate and secular Muslim country, has been confronted with the reality and savagery of radical Islam.

Beyond the human tragedy, the broader ramifications and shockwaves for the economy and the country's future development are yet to be felt.

After an initial, and misleading, report in the Wall Street Journal that JICA was considering withdrawing from Bangladesh, the Japanese government re-confirmed their commitment to Bangladesh's development.

This is encouraging given that all countries that have been affected by terrorism in Bangladesh, Istanbul, Paris, Brussels, and most recently the 200+ lives lost in Iraq, should work together to tackle this global menace.

So how should Bangladesh, and its key development partners such as Japan, move forward positively?

Firstly, we need to recognise that these innocent lives were taken with no purpose or logic. As we watched the plane land at Narita airport on NHK Global with the seven coffins on Tuesday morning met by Japan's foreign minister, we shared the grief of a nation at the senseless loss of the lives of those who dedicated themselves to support Bangladesh's economic development.

Watching each of the victims — the youngest of whom was a 27 year old lady — being profiled was heartbreaking. But disengagement is not in the interests of either country. Japan has been a long-term friend of Bangladesh, and as we have written almost exactly two years ago in an article, Japan's proposed "Big B Economic Growth Corridor" offers the potential for the transformation of the Bangladesh economy in terms of infrastructure development and export growth (refer to the article "Look East and prosper" published in Dhaka Tribune).

Work on the Matarbari 1400MW power plant, deep sea ports and Japanese economic zone are proceeding ahead of expectations.

Bangladesh is also receiving support from Japan in its metro rail and other large-scale infrastructure projects (indeed, the greater tragedy is that all the Japanese killed on July 1 were engaged in infrastructure development in Bangladesh).

It is also important to emphasise that development co-operation is in the interest of both Bangladesh and its partners. In the case of the Japanese economy, there are immediate benefits for Japanese construction and power sector companies from the "Big B" initiative.

But more broadly, Japanese companies establishing operations in countries such as Bangladesh can establish competitive re-export hubs to the rest of Asia, utilising Bangladesh's cheap labour force.

Moreover, the domestic market of 160 million is also attractive. But there are also broader geo-political considerations with Japan's development success via JICA counter-balancing the rise of China in the region which is pursuing its own "New Silk Route" and "One Belt, One Road" policies.

More fundamentally, the contrast between Japan's successful foreign policy based on trade

and economic development via JICA contrasts sharply with US foreign policy of invasion or military interventions in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya and elsewhere, which has, in large part, fuelled/provided fertile ground for the growth of ISIS.

It is important that Japan does not lose this core foreign policy focus that has underpinned the affection Bangladesh and other countries have for Japan and its people. Looking at the longer term challenges for Japan's economy, Abenomics is still struggling with a huge budget deficit and a rapidly aging population. A more global Japan is the key to its economic future, not a more isolationist one.

Japan, which lost seven of its citizens, and the EU that lost nine, should pro-actively support and help develop Bangladesh's economy that would lay the foundation for economic prosperity as an important counterweight to the growth of radicalism. This would be a fitting tribute to the 20 innocent people who lost their lives in the attack on Holey Artisan Bakery.

Validating or rewarding the terrorists' strategy by punishing 160 million people in Bangladesh by withdrawing economic co-operation would, by contrast, not honour the dead. Rather, it would encourage and embolden ISIS and similar terrorist organisations to target foreigners in other countries such as Malaysia and Indonesia, as was reported on Tuesday in the press.

The fight against ISIS is global not local — the solution is for deeper international co-operation, not less. It is important in this moment of profound grief and introspection in Bangladesh, Japan, Italy, Turkey, and Iraq that we remember that. In this context, the call between Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and his Italian counterpart Matteo Renzi following the Holey attack, where they pledged to collaborate in counter-terrorism activities was most welcome.

The two leaders also agreed that counter-terrorism would be taken up at the Asia-Europe Summit to be held in Mongolia on July 15-16, as well as being made a priority for the G8 group of leading countries where Japan holds the chair.

It is also understandable that Japan and the EU, who lost their citizens, and the broader international community whose citizens are living in Bangladesh would like to be assured by our government that it has a clear strategy for averting similar incidences in Bangladesh.

The immediate response of our prime minister through televised national address, announcement of two-day national mourning, and the expression of national sympathy and ceremonial support for the families of victims at the Army Stadium were most appropriate. However, the real task of restoring the shattered image of Bangladesh starts from here.

The tragedy has clearly demonstrated that the perpetrators are not the usual suspects as portrayed by the government. The killers are not Jamaat/Shibir or other religious extremists, as usually alleged. They are from middle or upper middle income backgrounds, with college/university education, just like our own children. They were missing from their families for months, and sometimes for more than one year.

We also understand that many other youths are similarly missing across Bangladesh. Our terrorism efforts thus need to be better targeted and informed by international support and experience, including identification of sources of financing and the organisers providing local-level support.

We also need to fight terrorism through social awareness and political inclusiveness. The old-fashioned British-era tactics of mass arrest by the police and politicising the events by pointing fingers to the opposition parties for domestic political purpose have not worked and will not work. Only by acknowledging the problem, Bangladesh will be able to adopt the appropriate strategy to fight against this kind of terrorism and assure the international community about its sincere efforts in tackling the problem.

This will be important in maintaining the confidence of global buyers, and thereby, the growth in our RMG sector, which accounts for 80% of exports. In addition, ensuring support in development initiatives such as Japan's "Big B" economic growth corridor, will have potential to transform our economy, and increase trade and investment with all the major economic powers in the region.

Continued economic prosperity will be key to generating large-scale and high quality employment for our youth, which in turn can be an important element in providing a less fertile ground for the growth in extremism for the next generation of Bangladeshis.