

Japan-Bangladesh relations: Way forward.

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ASHRAF UD DOULA

PRIME Minister Sheikh Hasina is scheduled to pay an official visit to Japan during the end of this month upon invitation from her Japanese counterpart Mr. Naoto Kan. She had earlier visited the country in 1997.

Bangladesh and Japan have traditionally maintained a strong relationship, characterised by mutual cooperation, respect, friendship, goodwill and partnership for development in the fields of economic, trade and commerce. The framework of cooperation between Bangladesh and Japan is underpinned by a number of common factors, such as climatic conditions, culture, religion, tradition and history.

Following our independence, fresh dynamism was infused into expanding those ties, both in depth and in dimension. Japan was the first developed country to recognise Bangladesh -- on February 10, 1972. Beginning with Bangabandhu's state visit in October 1973, all our successive heads of state/government have visited Japan.

A number of Japanese prime ministers have also visited Bangladesh. Their Majesties Emperor Akihito and Empress Michiko also visited Bangladesh in 1975, in their capacities as Crown Prince and Crown Princess.

The hijacking of a JAL flight by the Japanese Red Army to Dhaka in 1977 is an incident remembered by the Japanese people. The episode, leading to the release of the JAL passengers and the plane, not only familiarised the Japanese to Bangladesh, but also made the Japanese people considerably sympathetic towards the country. They still hold the same view towards us.

Japan has consistently been the number one donor to Bangladesh, offering close to \$10 billion since 1972, in the areas of socio-economic, infrastructure and human resource development, poverty alleviation, disaster management, environment protection etc.

There is a bipartisan caucus in the Japanese Diet (Parliament), Japan-Bangladesh Parliamentary Group, which serves as an alternative channel to reach the key political levels. Japan's friendship towards Bangladesh was clearly demonstrated when, in 2008, the then Prime Minister Taro Aso took over as the president of the Japan-Bangladesh Parliamentary Group.

In the last few years, Japanese society and politics have undergone a sea change. Unprecedented in its political history, especially since WWII, the opposition Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) captured power following the general election held in August 2009, throwing the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) to the opposition bench.

The current ruling party has also experienced an extensive bruising over a leadership tussle between Prime Minister Naoto Kan and his main rival Mr. Ichiro Ozawa, the former leader of the DPJ, commonly known as "Shadow Shogun" and credited as the main architect of bringing his party to power. However, he failed in all his attempts to become the prime minister due to allegation of financial corruption.

His chosen successor Mr. Yukio Hatoyama also made a quick exit after being appointed prime minister for a brief period, under similar circumstances, before Mr. Kan took over. In pursuit of the election pledges, the DPJ government has introduced certain reforms in domestic policies, but there have been hardly any major changes in foreign policy. Relations with China seem to be going through a rough patch as before, while US-Japan ties are back to square one, flip-flopping on Okinawa notwithstanding.

However, these changes have not affected Japan-Bangladesh relations. Indeed, our relations have continued to grow in all fields. Japan has pledged to provide funds for the three-mega projects -- the Padma Bridge, Dhaka MRT and the deep-sea port near Chittagong.

There has also been a perceptible change in the minds of the Japanese entrepreneurs about business and investment opportunities in Bangladesh. During the last three to four years major Japanese companies such as UNIQLO, NTT-Docomo, Ito-Ikado, Seiyu and a host of other smaller companies have invested in Bangladesh.

Our export to Japan also improved significantly during the period -- from \$98 million to well over \$200 million by the first quarter of 2010 -- and is showing a consistent rising trend. Japanese investment in Bangladesh, which has jumped to fourth position, is well over \$1.5 billion.

I am happy to note that we were finally able to purchase a land in 2007 for constructing our own mission building in the heart of the political centre of Tokyo. Once it is completed, it will not only be a proud and permanent address for Bangladesh in Tokyo, it will also save a significant amount of money currently being spent on rent.

In 2005, our government also funded the construction of a Shaheed Minar in the Ikebukuro park of Tokyo, which has not only become a cultural heart for the Bangladeshis in Japan but also a symbol of friendship between the two countries.

It is in the backdrop of these factors that Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina will visit Japan. It is also important for this first highest-level meeting between the two countries following assumption of power by the new governments in both countries in 2009. I am sure both the leaders will brief their counterparts about the policies of their respective governments. Besides, it can be safely assumed that the Bangladesh prime minister will carry a wish-list, while the Japanese side will also broach some issues of their interest.

It is my view that we should be realistic and try to better understand the current ODA policies of the Japanese government, and tailor our request accordingly. Japan is going through a comprehensive budget reforms programme, slashing funds from domestic and overseas projects not directly benefitting the common people. Their ODA fund, though one of the largest in the world -- totaling about \$16 billion annually -- has been overstretched to reach the African continent. A sort of donor fatigue is also palpable in the Japanese ODA circle.

What we should now try to focus on is Japanese assistance to our environ-



Moving together towards a better future.

ment/climate change related programme. Japan has pledged a fund of \$50 billion to assist the most vulnerable countries affected by climate change, and Bangladesh's eligibility in this regard is unquestionable.

Secondly, Japan has provided substantial assistance to our power and energy sector, and we should facilitate investment by Japanese companies in this sector. Thirdly, we may seek Japanese assistance in alternative and clean energy systems, i.e. setting up of nuclear plants (though there is restriction in ODA fund in this sector which can be circumvented). Japanese assistance can also be sought for creating a Dhaka-Chittagong industrial corridor.

We should also seek greater market access for our non-traditional items, such as fruits, vegetables and pharmaceuticals, which can be produced in Bangladesh under Japanese investment or joint ventures. While we may ask the Japanese government to set up a Japan Foundation Centre in Dhaka for

greater cultural exchanges, we may also ask them to set up a Bengali language department in Tokyo University. We can also seek greater cooperation in the IT sector. Earlier, JICA had commissioned a two-year study mission on the prospect of IT sector in Bangladesh.

I think we should also be ready to reciprocate and be sensitive to some of Japan's expectations. First of all, we should offer our unequivocal and unconditional support to Japan's membership to the UN Security Council. Second, we must also support Japan in the UN on this issue, which is very close to the heart of the Japanese people. In addition to enabling the Japanese companies to participate in some of our mega projects we should also offer to set up an exclusive Japanese export/industrial zone to be entirely managed by them.

The existing Japan-Bangladesh Joint Committee for Commercial and Economic Cooperation (JBCCEC), based in Tokyo, needs serious revamping in order to perform its mandated task. We

may also offer some scholarships to the Japanese youth for providing training in microfinance and in Bengali language in Bangladesh.

A number of Japanese people, including journalists, had extended tremendous help during and immediately after the liberation war to support our cause. It will be a good gesture if our prime minister recognises them personally during her visit.

Japan would also be interested to know about the state of institutionalisation of democracy, good governance and transparency, human rights as well as government initiatives in attaining overall development and reduction of poverty.

It is hoped that Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's visit to Japan, important as it is, will be able to not only establish a personal rapport at the highest level, but also to elevate the relationship between the two countries commensurate to the demands and needs of the twenty-first century.

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Banning corporal punishment extensively



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HEATHER N. GOLDSMITH

THE media has recently given us a glimpse into the lives of some of Bangladesh's children: a girl with disabilities was beaten for failing to contribute to the school fund, eight students were hospitalised after being punished for forgetting to bring colour pencils to class, a young girl had a mental breakdown after being tied to a bench as punishment, and a boy died after he followed his teacher's suggestion to ingest rat poison.

A 2008 study by Unicef indicates that these are not isolated incidents -- 91% of the students surveyed reported that they had been abused by teachers.

Above and beyond the immediate and tangible wounds of these incidents are

the long-term psychological impacts that obstruct the education and development of a child, even those who are mere observers of the abuse. Repeated studies have indicated that children learn best in an environment where they feel supported and engaged, but corporal punishment has been shown to generate feelings of humiliation, anxiety, and worthlessness.

Similarly, while school is intended to develop the child into a model citizen and productive member of society, corporal punishment has been shown to increase a child's vulnerability to depression, addiction to drugs, and tendencies towards violence. It also inhibits the development of independent and creative thought.

Technically, several legal safeguards

have existed in Bangladesh for years to protect children from the physical and psychological impact of corporal punishment. The most specific is the Children Act, 1974, which states: "If any person over the age of sixteen years, who has the custody, charge or care of any child assaults, ill-treats, neglects, abandons or exposes such child or causes such child to be assaulted, ill-treated, neglected, abandoned or exposed in a manner likely to cause such child unnecessary suffering or injury to his health, including loss of sight or hearing or injury to limb or organ of the body and any mental derangement, such person shall be punishable with imprisonment for a term which may extend to two years, or with fine which may extend to Taka one thousand or with both."

In practice, however, the laws have not been used to protect children because corporal punishment is expected, or at least tolerated, by a significant portion of the population. Several parents, especially outside of Dhaka, believe that they benefited from corporal punishment and encourage similar methods to teach their children. Those who recognise the negative impact that corporal punishment had on them personally or people they know often remain silent out of fear that confronting a violent teacher will result in serious retribution for their children.

In July of this year, Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK) and Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust (BLAST), out of concern for the safety and future of the students of Bangladesh, petitioned the High Court to order the Ministry of Education and others to take necessary actions to eliminate the use of corporal punishment in the schools.

Although the case is still ongoing, the Court is giving the matter considerable attention and the Ministry of Education has already begun to take measures to eradicate corporal punishment in schools. A circular has been distributed to all schools with a stern reminder that "corporal punishment is absolutely prohibited in all educational institutions," and with instructions for dealing with incidents in breach of the prohibition. New policies are also being developed to clarify the ban of corporal punishment in the schools of Bangladesh.

The Ministry of Education and BLAST have also been conducting independent investigations of the incidents of corporal punishment that have been brought to their attention through the media. The majority of the parties involved have reported that the situation has ended amicably -- usually with the family receiving a payout from the teacher. In one incident, the school merely transferred the alleged perpetrator to another school, where the teacher could presumably continue to use physical punishment as a means to controlling the classroom.

While an amicable solution is clearly

the target outcome in any case, the discrepancy between the severity of the punishment and the crime in these cases should raise serious concerns over whether the families of the victims believed that there were viable alternative options by which they could obtain a greater degree of justice.

Moreover, having a teacher merely pay a fine for any incident of corporal punishment does little to prevent similar incidents from reoccurring. There must be an intervention in these and other cases to prevent teachers from beating a child with relative impunity.

One option would be to turn to the lower courts to prosecute the cases on an individual basis. Legal aid NGOs around the country could work with parents and prosecutors to ensure that perpetrators are brought to justice. Unfortunately, this option requires that the plaintiff be willing to invest the time and expense necessary to litigate a case and be prepared to suffer socially as a consequence of bringing a case that is contrary to social norms. It would also make teachers easy targets for false and malicious allegations.

A better alternative would be to continue to look to the Ministry of Education to inspect the schools for incidents of corporal punishment and to take immediate and proportional disciplinary action against teachers who have been shown to abuse a child. In addition, teachers must receive training on non-violent and effective means to manage a classroom and inspire students in order to stop incidents from occurring. This requires there be sufficient funding to attract and retain only dedicated teachers.

Ultimately, ending corporal punishment in the schools requires a shift in how society values the dignity of children and respects their right to be free from violence. Unfortunately, the problem is much larger than corporal punishment in schools; children are routinely subjected to physical and humiliating punishments in multiple aspects of their lives.

There are several accounts of abuse in the home, especially against domestic workers. There are even several allegations of corporal punishment within government homes that are intended to "protect" children. Additionally, there are provisions in the current legislation that condones the use of physical force against a child.

To end the vicious cycle of violence stunting the potential of the next generation, we must all take an active role in protecting children from abuse, building their sense of self-worth, and teaching them peaceful and constructive means to resolve problems.

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Air cargo becomes new terror front

At the very least, the terrorists have made the air-freight sector a new battleground in their campaign. Security agencies, airlines and cargo handling companies will have to respond in a way that prevents further breaches without tying up international commerce.

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TWO bombs sent as air cargo from Yemen and cleverly disguised as part of a computer printer did not explode before they were defused last week. But they flew far enough to shake the confidence of travellers in air security measures.

The bombs went through four countries in four different flights, two of them carrying passengers, before they were intercepted in Britain and Dubai. A tip-off reportedly from Saudi Arabian intelligence defeated the plot, but that is scant reassurance for travellers and the airline industry.

If the terrorists behind it, suspected of belonging to a group called al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), had intended to detonate the devices in mid-air, they did not succeed. But they have exposed vulnerabilities in the system that we can ignore only at great peril to ourselves.

At the very least, the terrorists have made the air-freight sector a new battleground in their campaign. Security agencies, airlines and cargo handling companies will have to



respond in a way that prevents further breaches without tying up international commerce. That will be neither easy nor cheap, but the price would be disastrously high if the authorities failed to keep a step ahead of bomb makers who are constantly improving their skills and thinking up creative ways of deploying their deadly

handiwork.

Saudi intelligence might have saved the day this time, but any effective counter-terrorism must start at the source -- in this case, Yemen. AQAP has gained strength in that country, despite joint action in recent months between the United States and the Yemeni government. There have been missteps that have contributed to the problem.

The group was formed by terrorists who broke out of jail in Yemen a few years ago, and joined by detainees released from American, Saudi and Yemeni custody more recently. So-called surgical drone strikes have failed to decapitate its leadership -- and worse, collateral damage from those attacks has stoked enough popular anger to make it easier for AQAP to recruit new members.

The US will have to be less ham-fisted in its counter-terrorism efforts if it is to avoid an Afghanistan -- or Iraq -- type syndrome, with ill-advised military interventions incurring political costs for the local government.

The American experience in the region should have given the Obama administration enough of a lesson to do a better job in

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