

Exclusive Interview

'I want the Japanese to learn more about the passionate people of Bengal'

Japan's new ambassador to Bangladesh, Shiro Sadoshima, arrived in Dhaka recently. In an exclusive interview with The Daily Star's Diplomatic Correspondent Rezaul Karim on January 24 at his office, he talked on a wide range of bilateral issues. Following are excerpts from the interview.

The Daily Star (TDS): Japan and Bangladesh enjoy some of the warmest bilateral relations between two countries. How do you foresee these relations developing further in the days ahead?

Shiro Sadoshima (SS): Japan has been a very good partner of Bangladesh in development exercises ever since the emergence of this country. It is its number one donor country on a bilateral basis. And the people of these two countries also have love for each other. I think at this juncture, it is imperative for us to go beyond being development partner. We have to consult and expand the economic ties further. And also many other things like cultural ties. My mission is to push them forward as much as possible.

TDS: As the new ambassador in Bangladesh, what are the priorities you plan to emphasise during your assignment in this country?

SS: My mission is rather very clear to expand economic ties on the basis of what we have and consolidate what we did in the past decades. I would like to bring the best quality and long-term investment from Japan. To invite them, however, there is also a need to create a quality environment. I would like my Bangladeshi friends to do that. Japanese people's knowledge of Bangladesh is limited. I want to inform them more about this country. This country is full of art, people are of an artistic mind, which is something special. I want them to learn more about them, the passionate people of Bengal. That is my number one mission. In doing so, I want the Japanese to know more about Bangladesh, its culture and tradition. I have been here only for three months. I like The Daily Star which runs so many reports on culture, movie, art, music, paintings and so on. Japanese people also love it. Art drives your daily life whether you are rich or poor does not matter.

TDS: Japan is an economic powerhouse not only in Asia but also in a global perspective. It is a significant source of development aid to Bangladesh. Is there any plan to enhance Japanese overseas development assistance (ODA) to Bangladesh?

SS: We have limited budgetary resources. Japan has now deficit budget. But our determination is to continue to contribute to the least developed countries. We want to do more, but you know resources are very limited now. Looking back at the disasters a year back, we need to reconstruct the affected areas. So, we are trying very hard. It is time for you to invite more investment. More importantly, you are now coming out. You are one among the next eleven economies. Germany, Korea, China are going to come to the country for investment. You should really take full advantage of it. We would like to invite investment from Japan. We would like to do something much more on long term investment. This would be at the higher tier of investment in your country. The most important thing is you have good engineers, managers and workers. So we say it is time for us to invite investment. We are going to be a good development partner. However, you still need huge money for infrastructure and logistics.

TDS: Japan is Bangladesh's 11th-largest export market. Imports from Bangladesh make up 26% of all Japanese imports from the least developed countries, second only to those from Cambodia. How do you think trade between these two Asian economies can be further boosted?

SS: Let us work together in bringing quality investment from Japan. Though the number is limited, there are examples. There is a company in Chittagong that is making printing circuits. What is very good here is a good engineering basis in Bangladesh. At this moment there is no specific plan. I repeatedly say, let's do it together.

TDS: Japan-Bangladesh ties were established in February 1972 and the two countries are preparing to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the establishment of

diplomatic relations. Will there be any big announcement on this occasion?

SS: We are going to make an official announcement. We are planning a Japanese film festival, photo exhibitions, Ikebana festivals, etc. We would like to invite the Japan External Trade Organization (JETRO) missions. Some Japanese companies will be here. Japan-Bangladesh Economic Commission's Japanese chapter will pay a visit beginning in March. We are inviting a space industry mission, which consists of a number of government officials from trade and economy industry, science and education. They will come here. Mitsubishi and other big companies will also come here. We would also like to tell you that in this country you have very good human resources. We know that. We cannot build up a space industry overnight. By putting technologies and human resources together we can build up something. You can apply these technologies for disaster management, environment observations. Japanese scientists will come here. Let us exploit your potential by utilising the very good human resources of the country.

TDS: Can you further expand on the space mission?

SS: Let us discuss what kind of things could happen. The Japanese mission is pretty much serious. The Japanese system can also be built so that we can also benefit. In Southeast Asia, we are doing something.

TDS: How can Bangladesh reduce its huge trade imbalance with Japan? Would you suggest the sectors where Bangladeshi businessmen can enhance their export basket in Japan?

SS: In 2009-11 your exports to Japan doubled. The deficit was reduced significantly, but it is still there. To make it more balanced we have to promote your exports to Japan. And that also needs investments from Japan and then your products could be exported to Japan. That way there could be balance in trade. Communications, transport, logistics, financing, insurance, dispute solution all are needed. If you organise it well, you can provide very good business environment. There are some companies with headquarters in Japan, but linked to Indonesia and other countries. So communication is very important. Logistics are important. This country has a very good labour force. Considering your competitiveness, you have got more benefits. Bangladesh has a better administrative structure. This potential has not yet been exploited.

TDS: What are the major impediments to improving business and creating an investment-friendly environment for Japanese investors in Bangladesh? Will Japan assist Bangladesh government in removing these hindrances?

SS: We have to discuss the impediments too. Policies and systems built here are to meet your own requirements. And so we have to make some adjustments, to accommodate our needs to the fullest extent. We have to talk and sort out the impediments. Of course, speaking honestly, from investors' point of view political views should also be taken into consideration. Political risks should be minimised. We hope Bangladesh will also be politically stable. Only Bangladeshi people can solve the problems.

TDS: As ambassador of Japan, what do you think are the potential sectors in Bangladesh where Japanese companies will be willing to make investments?

SS: We believe that manufacturing has very good potential. Other than the company I mentioned there is another company producing security camera lenses. These are not only assembling camera lenses; they are producing parts of camera lenses. So you can build fine manufacturing industries with supporting industries. Now the total number of such factories is limited, but I believe you have very good potential. There is a company producing fertilizer and another Japanese gentleman wants to run several factories around the world. He thinks there is a very good engineering team in



His Excellency Shiro Sadoshima

Bangladesh; it is the best. My Bangladeshi friends can really do it. We want to work together, by joining resources together. A few weeks back, I saw news reports on ship building. It is coming up. This industry also involves many other manufacturing industries together. Engines, furniture and many things can be put together. It requires engineering and you got them. So why not go for ship building?

TDS: What is the latest position of the Japanese government regarding funding for the Padma Bridge? Is Japan ready to release the fund despite the World Bank's position on the issue?

SS: It is very simple. I have been saying we are watching very closely. We made a commitment last year. It is still there. The World Bank committed the largest portion, including consultancy. So we are waiting for a clearing of the allegations and the bidding process as quickly as possible. Unless those are settled we cannot go further. The World Bank is doing the consultancy portion. We committed for the construction portion. So, we are waiting and watching. We know that Bangladesh government is fighting very hard against corruption. But, remember, our commitment is still there. Say your government is going to set up a hospital. Then after discussion we say it is a good idea and then commit. But then if your government does not have any cash, our commitment is a cheque. With that you conduct bidding and pick up contractors. Then contractors start work and then we release the money. But the rest of the money is released according to the progress of the construction work. Many other donor agencies follow more or less the same pattern.

Details might be different from donor to donor but the basics are the same. Our part is the construction. First the consultancy should come and then the construction and then we release the money. So we say we wait and see. Without things starting you cannot ask: where is the money?

TDS: Would you tell us about the latest position of the Japan government regarding JICA-funded Metro Rail in Dhaka?

SS: They have done a feasibility study. We have to work it out first. Then we make a final decision. Of course, we know that the traffic condition is not good. But to work it out there are a number of things to be done. Of course rapid transit is one major step to help relax traffic congestion here in the city. But this kind of investment requires a sizable amount of money. So you have to do very good feasibility studies. You have to go through the transportation master plan first because somewhere in future you have to have the transportation system sustained. Many systems have to be combined. The construction is not the purpose, but public services. Many people misunderstand it. To do so you

have think of many other factors simultaneously. You have to look at the whole of Dhaka. See what happened in New Delhi. Before the subway system was developed, you paid 10-20 rupees by rickshaw, but now you can travel faster. Those kinds of things should be combined. What is going to happen to the rickshaw, CNG, buses? You also have to think how the whole city develops. Dhaka now is much larger. So you have to think in what way Dhaka will evolve in a much larger way.

TDS: Does Japan have any plans to raise the number of scholarships for Bangladeshi students and government officials?

SS: We wish we could. But we are also working under budgetary constraints. We will try our best, but it is hard to say if we can do it at this juncture. You have to realise 1,540 Bangladeshi students at the graduate level are studying in Japan. This is three times bigger than the Indian students. So you have a sizable number in Japan.

TDS: How can Japan cooperate with Bangladesh in tackling the impact of climate change in Bangladesh?

SS: We recognise Bangladesh as the number one vulnerable country. We are quite serious as to how we can help the government in mitigating the consequences of the change and adaptation. We are financially committed to help tackling climate change. Now the world community is trying to design a funding mechanism. Within the constraints, we will try to do our best.

TDS: Both Japan and Bangladesh uphold similar oriental values and culture. How can they cement this bonding further?

SS: I would like Japanese folks to know the richness of your culture. We plan to provide space in our embassy for your young painters to exhibit their paintings. I am personally talking to a Japanese young man who is working in Bangladesh and discussing how we can let the Japanese learn more about Bangladesh. On Facebook I am trying to show how your publication is interested in cultural things. I visited Bengal Foundation. Look at what is happening in Bangladesh.

TDS: Would you like to comment on politics as it happens to be in Bangladesh, particularly over the modus operandi of the holding of the next general elections?

SS: Giving comments to such things is not something for a foreign diplomat to do. It is your job, but I have observed that this country has got a very good system. Japan also has come through ups and downs. I firmly believe no government or no parliament is cleverer than its people in reversing the perspectives of people. I believe the Bangladeshi people will make a very good decision eventually. You got a very good system in place. You can be proud of your very good parliamentary system, constitution and everything. We also came all the way. So you can be patient.

TDS: Ambassador, you are aware about the economic downturn now in your country. Will you please tell us how Japan plans to overcome its weak economy and manage the public debt?

SS: The present cabinet's work is to make primary balance. The government is working very hard. All in Japan are trying hard to help the affected areas to come back to normalcy. It will take some time. One and a half months after the earthquake, I drove by myself along the coastline to Fukushima. I was 30 kms from the reactors. The coastline was devastated, but nonetheless I came back three and a half months later to some other part. They were coming back, transportation system was coming back in place. People are working very hard. Communities are coming back. You have to wait for some time. We are resilient.

TDS: Our government is going to set up nuclear power plants in Bangladesh. Do you think it would be wise for Bangladesh to go ahead with the plan even after the disaster of nuclear power plants in Japan?

SS: It must be decided by yourselves. There are many policy options. You have to discuss those. I shall remain silent. Management and safety measures are important. You have to consider all these.

US-Pakistan: Crafting new ties

EDITORIAL DESK: DAWN

NOTWITHSTANDING the hard-line positions adopted by some lawmakers and sections of the media on both sides, subtle messages seem to convey a positive mood in Islamabad and Washington. Being the aggrieved party, Pakistan has maintained a rigid stance and expressed its anger in more ways than one. The hurt to Pakistan came in rapid succession -- the Raymond Davis shooting, the SEALs at Abbottabad and, to top it all, the Salala strike.

The subsequent moves by the government were designed as much to express its justifiable anger over superpower recklessness as to placate angry public opinion. The Nato supply line cut-off, the boycott of the Bonn moot, the Shamsi base closure and the "no" to the Marc Grossman visit were actions whose severity were noted by America,

which at least on the Salala killings expressed regret, while insisting that commanders on both sides had made technical mistakes that led to the death of 24 Pakistani soldiers. Since then, behind the apparent impasse, the two sides have never really sat idle.

For Pakistan, the issue revolves round developing "new rules of engagement" as the prime minister repeated so categorically at Davos. This new relationship can be mutually fruitful, lasting and free from misunderstandings and perceived hurts if the two countries realise that there are limits to cooperation, especially because they do

Whether the two sides are able to evolve a new, comprehensive but pragmatic relationship constitutes a challenge to their diplomacy. That the two countries need each other is a realisation that seems to restrain governments in Islamabad and Washington.

that seems to restrain governments in Islamabad and Washington.

The other day, US-made F-16s arrived in Pakistan. For a nation which has not forgotten America's decision to hold back both the money and the planes Pakistan had paid for, the latest American decision

not -- and are unlikely to -- see eye to eye on the ambitions of some regional powers. Whether the two sides are able to evolve a new, comprehensive but pragmatic relationship constitutes a challenge to their diplomacy. That the two countries need each other is a realisation

should be considered a gesture. At the same time, the *New York Times* has reported that the American administration is likely to apologise to Pakistan over the Salala carnage.

If true, Islamabad has to respond positively and realise that a strategic relationship with America is in the nation's interests, no matter what position extremist parties adopt. One religious leader has said the resumption of Nato supplies will be "treason," while another has threatened to besiege parliament. While these visceral outbursts may have the general election in mind, the government must not lose sight of Pakistan's desperate economic condition, its long-term interests in a unipolar world and the new dangers lurking in its neighbourhood in Southwest Asia.