

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

Bangladesh and Japan need comprehensive partnership

In this exclusive interview, Matsushiro Horiguchi, former ambassador of Japan to Bangladesh, talks to Tokyo-based Bangladeshi journalist Monzurul Huq and reflected on various aspects of bilateral relations that the upcoming visit of the Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is bound to give a new impetus.

What are the main outcomes that the Japanese side is expecting from this visit?

It is epoch making that two leaders are meeting again only three months after they met last time in Tokyo at the end of May. Another milestone of the visit is that there is a record fourteen-year gap between the current visit of the Japanese prime minister to Dhaka, the last one was in 2000. This long interval was the result of political difficulties faced by Japan when the country's prime ministers changed every one year since Junichiro Koizumi left office in 2006.

I believe the main outcome of Mr. Abe's visit would be to show to the people of Bangladesh the real importance Japan attaches to her relationship with the country.

The visit is coming at a time when political situation in Bangladesh remains tense after the January 5 elections that the main opposition party boycotted. There remains the scope that supporters of the ruling block in Bangladesh will try to use the visit as a sign of Japan's endorsement of election results. How do you see the visit from that perspective, and do you think Japanese prime minister should give a clear hint of Japan's desire to see democracy in Bangladesh guarantees inclusivity, which is the essence of democratic principles?

In many of his speeches Mr. Abe mentioned very clearly about the importance of democracy, human rights and the rule of law. I believe this position is well known to everybody and Bangladesh is also not an exception.

Japan is trying to win the support of Bangladesh for Japan's bid for a non-permanent member seat in the UN Security Council.

Bangladesh is still in the race against Japan as it has not yet withdrawn its candidacy, though Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina had given a clear hint during her visit to Japan in May that she might convey the good news to her Japanese counterpart at the time when the Japanese prime minister's Dhaka visit materializes. Now as the visit is indeed materializing, how far are you optimistic about such an outcome?

In answering this question, I would like to remind you that Bangladesh has never faltered and never had been shaky on its pledge of support for Japan's bid for a permanent seat at the UN Security Council.

During Sheikh Hasina's visit to Japan in May this year, the two countries issued a joint declaration pledging to initiate a comprehensive partner-

ship. What are the areas that this comprehensive partnership mechanism is supposed to include?

At the summit meeting last May, the two prime ministers launched the Japan-Bangladesh Comprehensive Partnership and decided to work out the details and modalities of such a partnership at the earliest. The Joint Statement issued after the summit had outlined various ideas and programs under three specific areas. The first is cooperation toward attaining global peace and stability; the second is economic cooperation leading towards the promotion of mutual interest and regional prosperity; and the third is promotion of cultural and people to people exchanges. The modalities are to be detailed based on these ideas.

Japan has committed significant economic assistance for Bangladesh during Sheikh Hasina's Tokyo visit. What are the priority areas that Japan would like to see such economic assistance funding are channeled for the development of Bangladesh?

In my view, industrial diversification is one of the top priorities that Bangladesh needs to work out for achieving the goals of "Vision 2021", which is to become a mid-income country by that year. In view of the remarkable economic success of China, foreign investment should play the leading role to diversify Bangladesh economy. Wider regional development, including developing infrastructure for industrial growth and improving investment environment to attract foreign businesses has already been mentioned in the Joint Declaration, and therefore very important.

At the same time, we need to keep in mind that our highest priority in economic assistance is always on areas of enhancing social development, which is, contributing to the improvement of lives and livelihood of people.

Is this economic assistance coming at the expense of some form of political support that Japan is now trying to gain from various countries around the world as the situation in East Asia is increasingly turning tense?

For many decades before the situation in East Asia started turning tense, Japan had almost always been the biggest donor for Bangladesh. A large volume of aid has been pledged as Japan-Bangladesh relationship is now being elevated to a new comprehensive partnership.

We presume that a high level business delegation too will accompany Prime Minister Abe to Bangladesh. What are the prospects of increasing



Matsushiro Horiguchi served as ambassador of Japan to Bangladesh from 2003 to 2006.

A career diplomat, Mr. Horiguchi also was Japanese ambassador to Lebanon prior to his assignment to Dhaka and served in various capacities at overseas Japanese missions in countries like South Korea, Myanmar and Malaysia; as well as at the headquarters of the Japanese foreign ministry. After retiring from diplomatic service, Mr. Horiguchi joined academia as a professor at Tokyo's prestigious Waseda University. A prolific author with his critically acclaimed book on history of Bangladesh, Mr. Horiguchi is currently teaching at Nihon University. He has been elected president of the newly formed the Japan-Bangladesh Society in July, where representatives of a cross section of various civic groups like the business community, retired civil servants, academia and non-governmental bodies joined together with the aim of fostering a better understanding of Bangladesh in Japan.

Japanese investment in Bangladesh, and why Japanese investors are still not that enthusiastic in investing in Bangladesh compared to the enthusiasm that they have shown in investing in Myanmar, a country that in many ways not ahead of Bangladesh in creating a business-friendly nations closer than before?

friendly investment environment?

One reason I know is that, foreign investors in Bangladesh have been requesting Bangladesh government to improve the manifold investment impediments for many years. But as the process of improvement of such impediments remains very slow, investors might have been getting a pessimistic message about the prospect of improvement. On the other hand, foreign investors in Myanmar may have a favorable view on the possibility of improvement of investment impediments in coming years, even though the present level of impediments might be quite like, or even worse than, what we see in Bangladesh.

Bangladesh is also well known as a source of human resource supply. Several million Bangladeshis are working overseas and helping the economic uplift of countries where they work, as well as that of their own country. As Japan faces a serious shortage of human resources due to declining population and aging of the society, do you think there is any possibility for Bangladeshi labor force to join the labor market in Japan?

Yes, there is. An increasing number of foreign workers are now being employed by many Japanese companies for the necessity of adapting to the process of "globalization." However, the problem is, no consensus has yet been reached on the question of accepting foreign work force in unskilled labor market for the fear of a negative impact on the wage level of Japanese workers in that category. But I believe that in this category of labor too, Japan, however, will be obliged to depend on foreign workers in not a distant future.

Last time a Japanese prime minister visited Bangladesh was in 2000, fourteen years ago. Prime Minister Abe's visit after a long gap is being materialized at the backdrop of a number of significant developments that both the countries had gone through during that period. Though Bangladesh has achieved significant gains in political, social and economic aspects of the country, Japan, on the contrary, had faced, and still facing, a number of difficulties. Do you think these reverse trends are bringing the friendly nations closer than before?

As for the reason for a fourteen-year gap of a Japanese prime minister's visit to Bangladesh, it was mainly because of the political confusion the country had been going through, which I have already mentioned while answer-

ing your first question. It is true that Japan faced and is still facing a number of difficulties. But, under Mr. Abe's leadership, Japan has been recovering in many respects. The main reason that lies behind closer relationship between Japan and Bangladesh is the fact that interdependence between the two countries has been strengthening due to the deepening of globalization process.

In Japan a new non-governmental body with the participation of people from various civic groups has been formed recently with the aim of fostering a better understanding between Japan and Bangladesh. We congratulate you for being elected the first president of that organization, the Japan-Bangladesh Society. What are you aiming to achieve and what message do you intend to convey to the policy makers in Japan for further improvement of relationship between the two countries?

Japan-Bangladesh relations have been developing satisfactorily in the past decades through mutual efforts. These relations have been diversified in many ways, responding to the remarkable development of Bangladesh in recent years, and now being elevated to a new stage of comprehensive partnership. Its modalities have to be detailed by both sides.

In handling such broader concepts and related projects, non-governmental organizations like the Japan-Bangladesh Society can play an important role, as they have the participation of people from various civic groups. Our Society will be helpful to the government in finding appropriate solutions to problems extending over various sectors.

The Society is going to share a deeper understanding and professional knowledge on Bangladesh among its members, and through discussions, deliver qualified messages on pertinent issues to the government.

The Society will also undertake such projects as deepening mutual understanding and exchanges between Japan and Bangladesh on the recognition that our relations are now at a turning point from one based mainly on aid to one on closer interdependence.

Since press coverage in Japan on Bangladesh are not necessarily reflecting the actual situation of rapidly developing Bangladesh, the Society also intends to play an active role in disseminating fair and balanced information of the changing situation in Bangladesh to the people of Japan and to the world.

Why do flood protection embankments fail?

M INAMUL HAQUE

In the last week of August this year the flood protection embankment at Shariakandi of Bogra District failed. As a result several hundred villages in Bogra and Sirajganj were inundated with loss to properties and crops. Several upazillas of Kurigram, Jamalpur, Gaibandha, Bogra, Sirajganj, Tangail, Pabna and Manikganj lie in between the flood embankments built on both banks of the Jamuna. People living in between those embankments are used to living with floods, but they are more afraid of river erosion, which can occur even without floods.

This year, there was no forecast for severe floods. For the last few years, the monsoon winds caused heavy rainfall in the Indus basin, so there were severe floods in Pakistan. This year there was drought, so there was forecast for floods in the Ganges and Brahmaputra basins. It occurred, but it was not severe. But still there is time. The whole of September is the month of floods. This year Nepal experienced flood, but the waters flowing over Bihar did not reach Bangladesh. Teesta basin had heavy rainfall, which caused floods in Jhalpaiguri, Kuchbari in India, and in our Lalmonirhat and Kurigram districts. Floods occurred in Assam also at the same time, affecting Gaibandha, Jamalpur, Bogra and Sirajganj. The floodwaters could run off between the embankments of both banks of the Jamuna River, but the havoc was created due to the embankment failure at Shariakandi.

Why do flood protection embankments fail? One simple answer can be: they are earthen structures, so they can give in due to water pressure. But when Bangladesh Water Development Board (BWDB) puts embankments along the banks of a flooding river by acquiring public lands, it owes responsibility to the people. Because, they create two types of public life and economy: one within, and the other, outside the embankments. Those within the embankments face floods every year. They have to grow crops which can withstand floods, i.e., jute, sugar cane etc. They grow oil seeds and vegetables during winter. Those outside the embankments are supposed to be flood free, so they grow paddy and vegetables round the year. Their homesteads are built on lower grounds compared to the people in flood prone areas. Both the types are suitable. But areas affected by erosion are subject to unforeseen calamities. River erosion not only devours public properties, it breaks through the embankments and creates havoc in the flood free areas.

Most of the flood protection embankments fail due to river erosion. But if they are poorly maintained they can fail under water pressure from the river side. However, a river will erode its banks upstream or downstream of any bank protection work. That is its nature. That why National Water Policy 1999 Clause 4.2p directs to, 'Designate flood risk zones and take appropriate measures to provide desired levels of

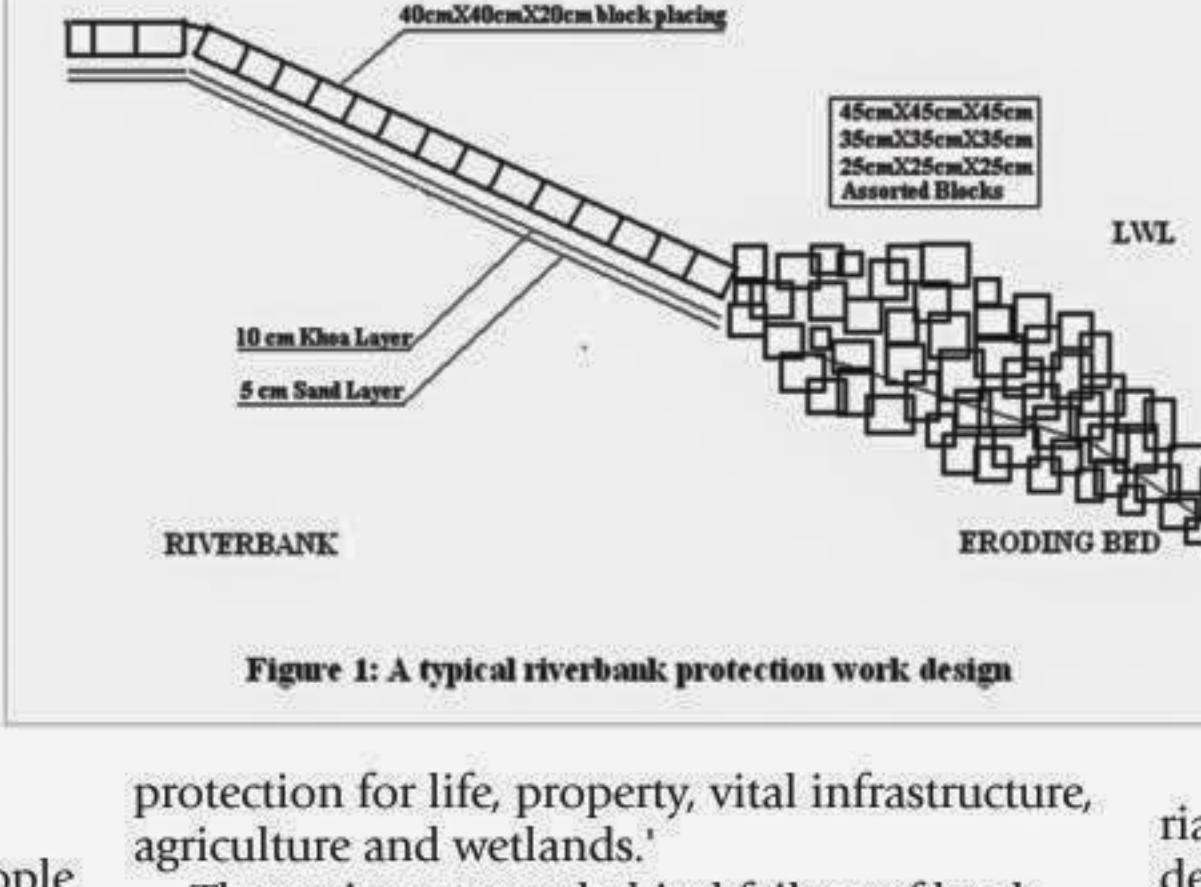


Figure 1: A typical riverbank protection work design

protection for life, property, vital infrastructure, agriculture and wetlands.'

The major reasons behind failure of bank protection structures are construction and design faults. A bank protection work has two portions, one, well placed concrete blocks sloping from above the water towards the riverbed; the other, assorted blocks of different sizes placed under the water roughly, towards the riverbed. The blocks above the water protect the bank from wave erosion. The blocks under the water slide down to form a rough slope towards the riverbed as defense shield when erosion approaches. A bank protection work fails when any of the two parts are poorly constructed. Minor defects can be addressed by taking immediate measures. Major defects cannot be addressed by emergency works.

The figure 1 shows a typical riverbank protection work design. Sufficient amount of blocks are to be placed depending on the maximum flow of the river. However to ensure it, these amount of blocks are to be placed by February. In March and April the blocks on the slopes shall have to be placed. Major defect in the structure remains when blocks in the slope are placed first in February or March, and blocks in the bed are dumped during April and May, when water rises in the river. It gives scope for defalcation by the contractor to claim total bill, without placing required number of blocks under the water. These types of works are certainly to fail when erosion occurs.

Use of geo-textile sheets as filter materials in the bank protection works is a major design defect. The defect was noticed by the writer when he was Chief Engineer, Design of BWDB in 2004. Geo-textile sheets were used in the late seventies to construct the Khulna Mongla Road. These sheets were placed horizontally between layers of muddy soil for constructing the road. Thus the muddy soil did drain down but did not flow out laterally. The importers of this material at that time lured the design engineers of BWDB to use them in the embankment slopes. Beforehand, embankment slopes were filtered by sand and brick chips. In that case any repair work or replacement could be done easily.

The problem of geo-textile is, first, its pores get clogged by mud and it loses its filter quality,

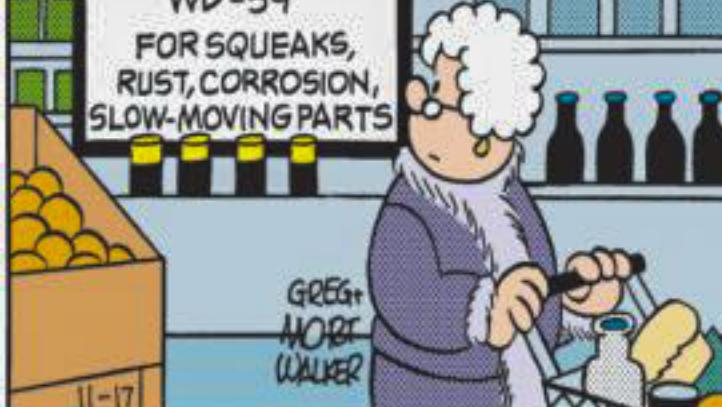
secondly, if erosion hits, repair work is impossible without removing the whole sheet, and thirdly, if erosion continues, it pulls down the whole work. Such scenes are rampant at many bank protection works of BWDB. The writer banned the use of geo-textile during his time in office but had to face the consequences. The use of geo-textile returned after his transfer and is being used indiscriminately all over the country.

The corporate culture reigning over BWDB is no less responsible for failure of its bank protection works. Before the nineteen nineties, an Executive Engineer (ex-en) of BWDB in the field was given all powers and was held responsible for all his works. Since the mid nineteen nineties, corporate culture was introduced by the WB and ADB to float tenders and appoint contractors as per their formula, and to pay as per report of their consultants. Now an ex-en of BWDB has no power but works as a postmaster. He gets his works as part of a package program, design is given in favor of the material suppliers, contractors are appointed by the political masters, bills are prepared as per direction of the consultants, and advances and payments are made by the accountants. As a result, bills are being paid fully, though the works remain unfinished or defective at many places. In this corporate culture, if any work or embankment fails, no responsibility or accountability can be fixed on anybody.

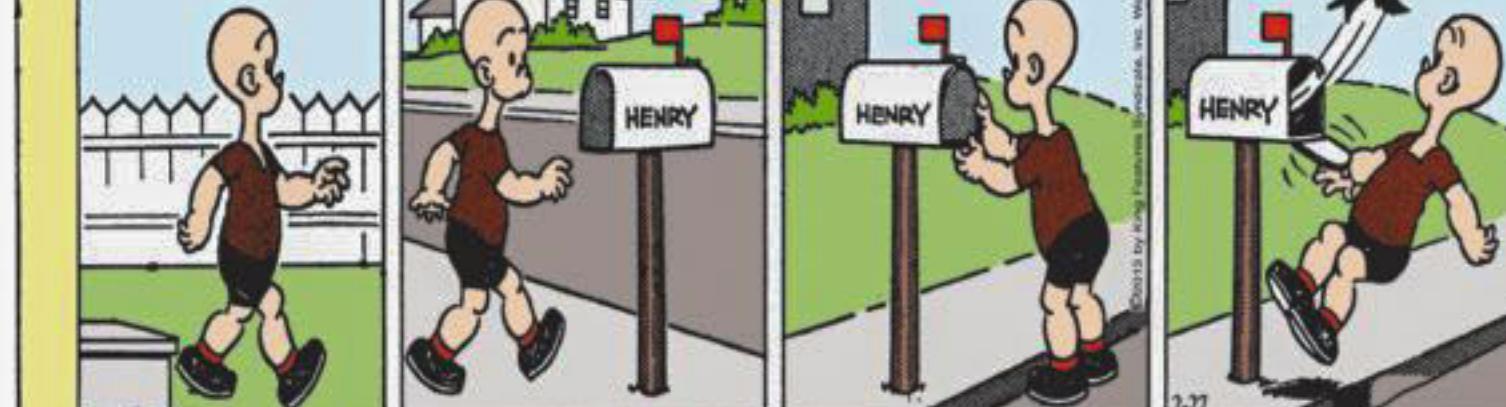
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BEETLE BAILEY

by Mort Walker



HENRY



by Don Trachte

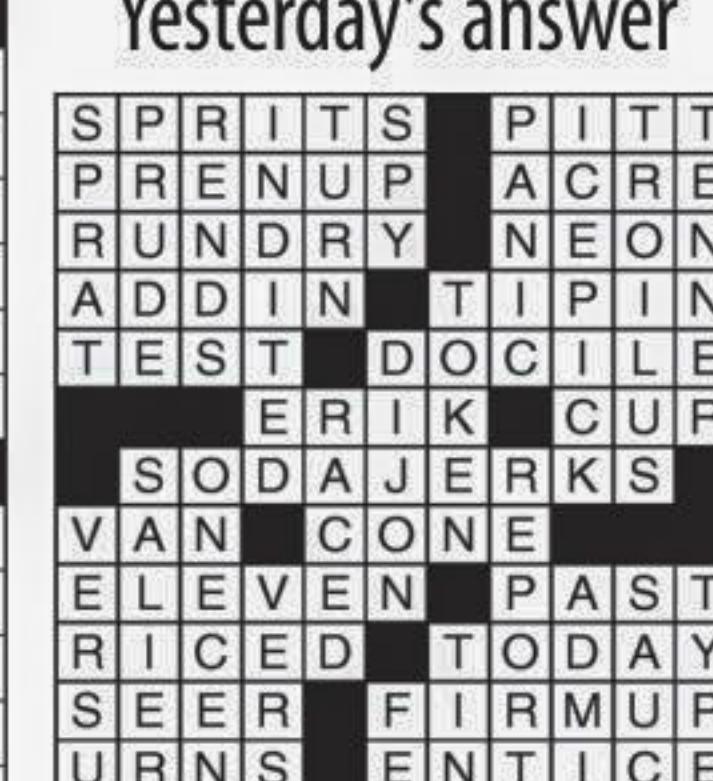
QUOTABLE
Quote

A celebrity is a person who works hard all his life to become well known, then wears dark glasses to avoid being recognized.
Fred Allen

CROSSWORD by Thomas Joseph



Yesterday's answer



CRYPTOQUOTE

D UFRI FQO CDHGFY CDPP NOFC CDSU
FQO RFCIO, ZKG SIZJU QH, SUZS SUI PIHH
CI QHI FQO RFCIO SUI NOIZSIO DS CDPP AI.
- SUFYZH BIMMOHFK

Yesterday's CRYPTOQUOTE:
THE MOST COMMON WAY PEOPLE GIVE UP THEIR POWER IS BY
THINKING THEY DON'T HAVE ANY.

- ALICE WALKER

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Application deadline: Tuesday, 9 September 2014

Interview: Wednesday, 10 September 2014

Registration : 11 September & 14 September 2014

Classes commence : Sunday, 14 September 2014

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