

I extend my warmest greetings to the readers of The Japan Times on the 47th Anniversary of the Independence and National Day of Bangladesh.

On this auspicious occasion, I pay deep homage to Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the Father of the Nation who led us in our movement for independence. It is a matter of great honour for us that the Father of the Nation's historic call for independence on 7th of March 1971 was recognized by UNESCO, last October, as part of the Memory of World Register.

I convey my profound respect to their Imperial Majesties, Emperor Akihito and Empress Michiko, and convey our greetings to Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, and to the Government and friendly people of Japan. I congratulate and extend warmest felicitations to my fellow Bangladeshis in Japan.

Celebration of our National Day this year assumes special significance and cause for celebration as Bangladesh recently qualified for graduation from a least developed country to a developing country. We acknowledge Japan's contribution in this achievement. Japan has been one of our most important development partners since our independence. Today, this strong relationship stands firm on the foundations of 'Comprehensive Partnership'. Two-way bilateral trade is nearly 3 billion dollars and is expanding at a steady pace. We are encouraged to see the growing number of Japanese companies in Bangladesh, with over 250 of them now in the country. The Japan Bank for International Cooperation (JBIC) in its latest report recognized Bangladesh as a '*promising country for overseas business over the medium term*' for small and medium enterprises, based on a survey of over 600 Japanese companies.

Bangladesh has one of the friendliest foreign investment and trade environment in the region. We are blessed with a large pool of skilled labour force. The World Economic Forum's Development Index ranks Bangladesh at 34th position among emerging economies, and one of the best performers in South Asia. Our GDP growth has remained steady at over 6% for the last decade, crossing 7% the last two years, and is expected to be 7.48% this year. Foreign direct investment (FDI) to Bangladesh is expanding significantly. One hundred special economic zones are being developed in Bangladesh, including one exclusively for Japanese investors. I invite Japanese investors to be a part of this exciting time in Bangladesh and to take advantage of the special incentives being provided.

Our industrial sector is also witnessing rapid expansion. Bangladesh is the second largest ready-made garments (RMG) producer in the world and Japan is our number one destination of apparel products among our non-traditional markets. Top priority has been placed on expanding internet connectivity and digitization and a 'Digital Bangladesh' is now within sight. Bangladesh is now a leading information and communications technology (ICT) outsourcing destination, with annual export earnings in the ICT sector expected to be over 1 billion dollars this year.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's development and growth roadmap, Vision 2021 and Vision 2041, places an inclusive and participatory development model at the center of all national development efforts. This has resulted in notable strides in poverty eradication, public health, education and women's advancement.

As a leading contributor to UN peacekeeping globally, Bangladesh remains committed to promoting international peace and security. We will continue to work closely with Japan to achieve our shared vision and commitment to peace, stability and sustainable development in our region and globally.

Long Live Japan-Bangladesh Friendship.