

Observation Tour of Pakistan

1-4 October 2014 Dr. Surin Pitsuwan

Pakistan, a country of tremendous diversity in ethnic composition with population of 186 million, growing at 1.49% annually, extreme income disparity, one of the lowest adult literacy rates (55), a ground zero of religious extremism and cultural conservatism, is located at the center of a most geopolitically contentious region of the world. With Iran to the West, Afghanistan to the Northwest, China to the North and India to the East, Pakistan holds a key to stability or, more often than not, violent volatility of the South Asian Sub-continent. Thus, Pakistan's socio-economic development and political integration and viability are in the interest of the wider world.

ISLAMABAD

Having observed many difficult roads to development of many Muslim countries and societies, including my own, I am grateful to Japan International Development Agency (JICA) for the opportunity to travel through some parts of Pakistan to witness development projects in the Federal Territory of Islamabad, Khyber Phaktunkhwa, and Greater Lahore, Punjab Province. My areas of interest are education, scientific and technological development, inclusive growth and human security.

I was very impressed by the high commitment of the Pakistani Government in pursuing a long term development vision as contained in the recently launched Vision 2025. Dr. Ahsan Iqbal, Minister of Planning, Development and Reform, and Dr. Muhammad Ishaq Dar, Minister of Finance, described with confidence that the 7-pillar Vision would lead to a more sustainable and inclusive national progress. The emphasis on human and social capital, democratic governance and institutional reforms and a focus on knowledge based and competitive economy would open up areas for collaboration and contributions from a development

agency like JICA to help transform Pakistan into a more inclusive and stable society in the future.

A visit to the Allamah Iqbal Open University was a very inspiring moment. The top management of the University, including the Chancellor, was very grateful and enthusiastic about the assistance provided by the Government of Japan in the form of television broadcasting equipments and training. One of the biggest open universities in the world, AIOU has a nation-wide coverage, delivering its educational services to remote areas where educational facilities and personal do not exist. The positive impact of JICA's assistance in this project is far beyond measurement. Further technical training in the production program development will be a logical extension of the project.

I also had an opportunity to observe the Construction Machinery Training Center (CMCT) outside of Islamabad. Young men from many parts of the countries, including from those volatile Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) were being trained to use and maintain heavy construction equipments. A very relevant educational program, responsive to the need of remote local areas, the Center is very well managed, led by a very inspired group of administrators and trainers. This could be a nucleus of network of similar projects in neighboring countries like Afghanistan and other Central Asian countries to collaborate on training basic skills for heavy machinery operations and maintenance.

A side trip to the fabled Buddhist ruins of Taxila was a welcome addition to the observation program. The ancient center of learning known as the Gandahar Civilization near Islamabad indicates very clearly the great potential historical and cultural assets that Pakistan possesses which could serve as valuable resources for tourism industry, provided that political stability and security could be achieved. This is one area that the Government should pay attention to and JICA could extend cooperation. It is a quick foreign exchange earner and a very well-recognized industry as providing jobs and employments for the larger spectrum of the society. It leads to an inclusive growth that Pakistan needs.

Another meaningful project assisted by JICA is the Lok Virsa Museum or the National Institute of Folk and Traditional Heritage. A splendid folk or ethnic

museum where all ethnic groups from all regions of the countries could take pride in, this is important to nation building efforts for a country as diverse as Pakistan. A soft approach to national identity construction, JICA certainly chose a right entry point, helping the Pakistanis to be aware of their rich cultural resources and providing JICA with a tremendous level of goodwill from a grateful people and government. It is a national pride and has become a tourist attraction for all visitors to Pakistan.

LAHORE

Lahore is the center of commerce and culture of Pakistan. A very vibrant and dynamic city, Lahore offers a lot of opportunities for cooperation, public entities and private sector, with JICA.

A very unique institution called the Government College of Technology Railway Road, Lahore (GCT RR) is a recipient of JICA's support in the construction of the building which houses training facilities for young men and women in mechanical and architectural courses. It is a part of the federal government's reform of technical and vocational education and training (TVET). A very relevant academic institution focusing on basic skills in drafting, drawing, designing, in response to the current need of the market, GCT RR provides opportunities for youth who are eager to be trained and interested in employment. The students and alumni and faculty members were eager to engage with visitors and were very proud of their training and confident about their future.

I also was given an opportunity to visit the University of Engineering & Technology (UET), Lahore. JICA provided equipment to replace obsolete ones for various departments, ranging from engineering to petroleum technology to city and regional planning. The Chancellor and his top management team spoke very highly of the value of the assistance from JICA and would like to do more for remote areas technical training. A very worthwhile project of bilateral cooperation in the area of technical training.

A private higher education of repute is the Lahore University of Management Sciences (LUMS). A very well managed and a highly motivated leadership team, LUMS is a result of Punjab's private business' contribution to management training for young Pakistanis of high middle class background. USAID has also been supportive of the University. It is an example of excellence in higher private education that can be expanded to benefit a larger number of future managers in Pakistan. With a proven record of success, faculty exchange programs with universities in Japan would be very beneficial to both sides.

The most inspiring encounter was the last item on my Agenda. The Non-Formal Education Promotion Project (NFEPP) with the Government of Punjab. With only 55 % adult literacy rate, Pakistan is faced with a large number of children (age 5-15) out of school. It is a very serious problem due to lack of facilities, social values and awareness on the value of modern secular education. I was led to visit a "non-formal primary" and "vocational" "classrooms" outdoor under the trees and in an abandoned public building. The eagerness, curiosity and passion shown by the stakeholder, volunteer teachers, students and parents are extremely inspiring and encouraging. JICA has sparked a very powerful fire of desire for success among the poor parents and innocent students in remote villages of Pakistan. This will be a very strong drive for further desire for self-improvement through education among the under-privileged people of Pakistan. It is a seed that will grow into a big tree of change and transformation in the future.

OBSERVATION:

Pakistan is a typical Muslim country where traditionalism and conservatism are still holding back the majority of people in their old cultural values of skepticism for change and transformation. And yet, the failure of catching up with the rest and being prepared for modernity has led them to anger and bitterness against others who have made the transition successfully. This has led to tension and confrontation in many places of the Muslim world. Situated at the crossroads of religious and ethnic diversity, Pakistan is potentially a tinder box of violence

and political conflicts that could spill over to the already volatile region. With the drama of ISIS unfolding in Iraq and Syria and tension in Palestine, and social and political strives in other Middle Eastern and Arab countries, development and transformation of Pakistan would be only a first step on a long road of stability and peace. Infrastructure, physical and human, is indeed very critical for the survival and stability of the country. Water, transport, electricity, agriculture and human resource development are areas that the country is urgently in need of. JICA is one of the main contributors to national development. And the Vision 2025 offers a very excellent opportunity for JICA's deeper engagement in national development efforts.