

Japan Pledges To Eradicate Hunger in Africa in 10 Years

by Ramtanu Maitra

Less than a week before the FAO's June 3-5 high-level conference on World Food Security and Global Challenges in Rome, Japanese Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda addressed the Fourth Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD IV), in Japan's port city Yokohama. With 52 African nations represented at the gathering, Fukuda pledged Japan's expertise to bring about a "Green Revolution" in Africa to make the continent food secure. "As Africa seeks to achieve its own Green Revolution, I would like to put out a call for action, aiming to double the current rice production output of 14 million tons, over the next ten years," the Japanese prime minister said.

Japan's initiative to become involved in Africa to eradicate that food-short continent's hunger, and make it food-secure, poses a stiff challenge to the centuries-old policies imposed by the Anglo-European colonial powers. That policy—to view Africa as a continent full of mineral resources and cheap labor—is still in practice today, almost five decades after the last colonial power officially left the continent, and is the cause of Africa's perpetual food shortages. The focus of that policy, as it always has been, is to keep the African nations divided, bereft of adequate physical infrastructure, preventing them from becoming agro-industrial, sovereign nation-states, and dependent on food from abroad. The objective was to keep the population as small as possible, as vulnerable as possible, and to utilize these externally created weaknesses to get full access to Africa's vast mineral reserves, while paying starvation-level wages to its workforce. An aspect of this policy was to make available, emergency food and financial aid, as crumbs from the table of the wealthier nations, when the inevitable mass starvation hit.

There is only one way out of the dangerous trap that Africa has been caught in for centuries, and that is to develop its agro-industrial infrastructure utilizing its human and natural resources. However, the world has largely looked away—until now. At the TICAD IV, Fukuda struck the right chord when he said: "With a wealth of agricultural experience, Japan is willing to cooperate with countries and international organizations to develop irrigation systems, improve the varieties of crops raised, and foster workers in the field of agriculture. . . . If I were to liken the history of African development to a volume of literature, then what we are about to do now is to open a new page, entitled 'The Century of African Growth,'" adding that developing transportation infrastructure is key to expanding economic growth there.

Fukuda's commitment takes on more significance in light of the recently emboldened alliance of major Eurasian nations, who have committed themselves to resisting the British policy of globalization and war. If Fukuda, who is scheduled to address the FAO conference, takes this perspective to Rome, it will represent a major challenge, and opportunity, for shifting the world's agenda in the direction proposed by Helga Zepp-LaRouche in her emergency mobilization call for doubling world food production, dumping the World Trade Organization (WTO), and establishing a new world monetary system based on renewed industrial and agricultural development. The food crisis will provide the fulcrum for shifting world politics back to the anti-colonial perspective of President Franklin Roosevelt, against the British empire, just at the point of maximum danger for mankind.

A Short-Term Crisis

The ongoing global food crisis has two aspects of it. To begin with, a large number of people, perhaps tens of millions, have become vulnerable to hunger and starvation. Most of these suffering people are consumers of rice, but there also exist those nations such as Pakistan, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, among a few others, whose staple is wheat—but now, there is no wheat available to them to consume.

Rice differs from other agricultural commodities such as corn, wheat, and soy, in that very little is traded internationally. Just 7% of the global harvest, about 30 million tons a year, goes to the world market, but precisely because the market is so thin, small shocks can lead to massive famines. Half the world's population, more than 3 billion people, depends on rice for their staple food, which is also highly vulnerable to natural calamities such as floods and cyclones. During the last monsoon season, Bangladesh lost about 800,000 tons of rice to the rising waters; and only recently, Myanmar lost about 700,000 tons to a vicious cyclone which also killed thousands, and flattened the



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Japanese Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda has committed his nation to bringing about food security in Africa. He is shown here addressing the 4th Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD IV), May 28, 2008.

FIGURE 1

Paddy Rice Production in 2006



Source: FAO.

Irrawaddy River delta area.

The major rice importing countries are in Africa, Asia, and Central America. Africa accounts for 30% of the global rice imports, and Asia 45%. Among the hardest hit are West African countries such as Senegal, Nigeria, Ivory Coast, and Cameroon, where the population has become increasingly urbanized, and shifted from consuming the traditional staples of millet and cassava to eating rice. These countries became significant importers of rice, and more dependent on food imports generally, when they were forced to liberalize their agricultural markets as a condition of IMF/World Bank loans from the late 1970s onwards. Haiti, Mexico, and Honduras, whose own agricultural markets and production have been undercut by subsidized U.S. crops dumped when prices were low, are also suffering from the high prices. Senegal, Cameroon, Haiti, and Mexico have all seen food riots.

Several major rice-growing countries, which include India and China, have stopped exporting rice because of the sharp drop in their inventories, and the food requirements of their own large populations. As a result, food-short African countries, along with many Asian nations, are desperately seeking rice. Japan, which has reserves of 1.5 million tons of rice, has made the decision to reduce its stock significantly, to help the neighboring rice-short Asian countries and at least five African nations.

Cutting Off Your Own Feet

The second aspect of the ongoing global food crisis derives from the fact that the Green Revolution of the 1960s

and '70s, in a masterly interplay of water, fertilizers, and high-yield variety seeds, which brought about a sea-change in the food situation in Asia, where it was fully implemented, has been set aside by governments which foolishly believed that, "the agro problem has been resolved." It should be noted that the lack of investment in agricultural infrastructure over the years, and the virtual neglect of this hugely populated sector, has created the dire food crisis that exists today. But the sin has caught up with the sinners, and there is no getting away from the fact that, if the nations of the world want real sovereignty, they must be food-secure, and move now, on a war-footing, to double food production.

On the other hand, Africa never enjoyed the benefit of a Green Revolution, because it was meant to be food-short continent for the reasons stated above. Thus, it is heartening to hear Japan's Premier Fukuda, speaking out from the podium, addressing the African nations, declaring, "Here at this juncture, Japan wants to walk alongside the African people, shoulder to shoulder. . . . In order to boost the momentum for African growth, the most important thing is the development of infrastructure. The infrastructure that Japan is to build must be the 'people's infrastructure,' bringing prosperity to communities and the people living there."

These are strong promises, and the Africans will be waiting eagerly to see if they are implemented. As one African leader told Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh during the India-Africa summit in early April, in New Delhi, Africa wants India to "walk the walk."

Needless to say, Japan has the expertise and worldwide experience in developing infrastructure such as roads and railroads, ports and water distribution systems, among others.

Another area of Japanese expertise, is in the development of rice strains already in use in Africa. Developed in West Africa, with the collaboration of the Japanese government, UN Development Program (UNDP), the African Development Bank, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the FAO, and the Rockefeller Foundation, the "New Rice for Africa" (NERICA) is now providing hope for Africa's rice self-sufficiency.

Rich in protein, and pest- and disease-resistant, NERICA combines the best traits of the Asian and African rice strains. Vital to the effort, are gene banks that contain seeds of 1,500 African rice varieties, which had faced extinction as farmers abandoned them for high-yield Asian varieties. The initial experimental work at the West African Rice Development Association (WARDA) has developed the rice into a valued crop, capable of increasing harvests by 50%. From the seven pilot countries—Benin, Ivory Coast, Gambia, Guinea, Mali, Nigeria, and Togo, NERICA's work is being further disseminated to East African countries such as Uganda, Rwanda, and Tanzania.

Japan Ready To Join Eurasian Leaders

Beyond all this, what emerges is the willingness of Fukuda's Japan to take on new global responsibilities. Japan had been in the shadow of a British-dominated United States for far too long. As long as Washington was committed to policies of mutual benefit for itself and its neighbors around the world, this could be tolerated. But, today, Washington has not only abandoned the welfare of its own people, but is incapable of dealing with world problems, under conditions that its own economy is destroyed, and its standing in the world severely diminished. Therefore, Tokyo's new mission is all the more welcome.

More importantly, Russia, India, and China have begun to assume greater responsibility for that vast region. On May 15, meeting at Yekaterinburg, a city on the eastern side of the Ural mountain range, foreign ministers of the RIC group (Russia, India, and China) discussed regional security and focused on the global food crisis. None of them is short of food. Their concern about the global food crisis indicates that there is a realization that the Eurasian landmass, which stretches from the western shores of Europe to the eastern shores of Asia, embracing more than 4.5 billion people, can be stabilized, only if the food security of each and every nation is attained.

Japan was not at the Yekaterinburg foreign ministers' meeting, but Japan's role at the TICAD IV brings the same issues to the fore. Fukuda promised to double Tokyo's development aid to Africa over the next five years, including \$4 billion in loans for infrastructure, while doubling grant aid and technical assistance as well.

But Africa is interested in more than that. The issue is what the chairman of the African Union, H.E. Jakaya Kikwete, President of the Republic of Tanzania told India's Premier Singh. It is time to "walk the walk."

For Africa, closer ties with Russia, India, China, and Japan means having its voice heard on the international stage, especially since Japan is the host of meetings for the Group of Eight industrialized nations this year, including a summit meeting in July.

"What Prime Minister Fukuda decides this week will set the tone for this Summer's G-8 summit where we expect action on promises to Africa—not more rhetoric or fancy accounting," said Takeo Yamada, spokesman for Oxfam Japan, prior to the TICAD IV.

What Africa needs today, and for many years to come, is a comprehensive water management program to ensure a permanent supply of freshwater through nuclear desalination, and canal irrigation systems, among other measures. Abundant cheap power with the source being nuclear fuel will not only provide Africa with power for its agro-industries, but would enable it to develop an infrastructure for health care, education, and industry—heavy, medium, and small-scale. And, yes, a railroad that would span East to West and North to South, making investments and markets available to all Africans, would be of prime importance.