

Are Bananas Really Yellow?

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Last April Fools' Day the news was not a hoax at all. The Japanese media reported that Filipino Kidnappers had released Mr. Wakaoji, manager of the local branch of Mitsui Bussan, after four and a half months of captivity.

Of course, I was very pleased at the news. A little later, however, I became terribly dismayed to see an interview with an angry Filipino businessman on TV. He was angry with the Japanese people and their Government for worrying more about one Japanese than thousands of Filipino women who were forced to prostitute themselves in Japan. I was dismayed because his statement made me realize the Japanese arrogance, selfishness and indifference to other Asians, and I knew I was one of those Japanese. Actually, Filipinos refer to us as a bunch of bananas. Do you know why? Well, they see us as being yellow on the outside like they are, but once peeled, white on the inside like Americans and Europeans; Thus, we Japanese are not really yellow in their eyes. We are not close to them.

Today an estimated hundred thousand Asian immigrants are working illegally at very low wages here in Japan. They are toiling at jobs that we don't want to do. But few regard this as a problem, saying, "They are even poorer in their own country, so the contracts are good for both of us." I disagree, because we Japanese have a lot to do with their poverty.

In the late 1960's, having achieved incredible economic success, Japanese started to invest their energy and money in other developing countries, mostly in South East Asia, where the cheap work force and natural resources were abundant. These investments were made as economic assistance. Here are some of the results we can observe in our beautiful neighboring country, the Philippines.

On the big southern island of Mindanao, people have suffered from floods and droughts since 1979, because almost all the forest has been bought by and chopped down by Japanese companies.

A famous Japanese steel company built a factory on that island. First they had planned to construct it in Chiba prefecture, but they changed their plan, because the residents there opposed it for fear of air pollution, which is now harming the people in the Philippines.

The Asian Development Bank, in which Japan plays a major role, furnished financial aid to a town called Nabotas to build a large, modern port. As a result, more than 20,000 fishermen lost their jobs and now live in a slum, because this port turned out to benefit local and Japanese fishing and food processing industries, but ruined local fishermen.

We've just glanced at some of the miseries the Filipinos are facing. You may say, "Japan isn't the only one to blame. Other countries, like the U.S., are doing such things, too! Moreover, it is the late Marcos Regime and other leaders who are most to blame." I think this is partly true, but still it's just an excuse.

Let's face it. Japan's assistance has greatly helped leaders like Mr. Marcos to become richer while most of his people have become a lot poorer. A full third of the residents of Manila live in illegal slums. The national unemployment rate is over 20%. You may think the Philippines is an exceptional case. But not at all. In Indonesia, in Pakistan, and in other developing countries, people are facing similar situations. No wonder they need to work illegally in Japan even if for such low wages.

I was so disillusioned with Japan's so-called assistance when I found these things out that I can't help thinking it is destroying other nations instead of helping them. I can't help thinking that our assistance may be giving people a better means of life in some cases but creating cultural confusion through attempts at Westernization as well. And I can't help thinking that it is we who have been getting greater benefits out of the assistance than the intended recipients. Thus, I just can't stop thinking we are also responsible for their poverty. We know that without their natural resources and markets, Japanese couldn't have succeeded, and that we are still badly in need of them in order to survive in this politically and economically complicated world. This is our problem because we are living in this complicated world. Change is necessary **RIGHT NOW!**

Then how? I know this is such a big and difficult problem. I am not about to tell you a phony solution. There is only one solution, that is, we change, opening our eyes to the problem. Only when enough people are aware of this problem can we start to do something about it.

So we, living in this affluent society, must realize that there is another side; another side hidden by our richness and happiness; another side in which a lot of people are in trouble. Then and only then, when we stop being so-called bananas, will everything start to change?