

Shockwaves of Charlie Hebdo Incident

Ken Koyama, PhD

Chief Economist, Managing Director

The Institute of Energy Economics, Japan

The terror attack on the French weekly magazine Charlie Hebdo has sent shockwaves throughout the world. Not only in France where a series of terror attacks killed 17 people, but also in the rest of the world including other Western nations, the Middle East and Islamic countries, the terrorist attack and its aftereffects have shaken social stability.

On January 7, an armed terrorist group attacked the Paris head office of weekly magazine publisher Charlie Hebdo, killing 12 people including two police officers as well as employees of the publisher. The group reportedly attacked the publisher in retaliation for insulting the Prophet Mohammed and fled away after the attack. Later, two suspected members of the group took hostages. On January 9, French special forces surrounded them and shot them to death. On January 14, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), released video footage claiming responsibility for the attack. But its involvement in the attack has not been clarified. Separately, a policewoman was attacked and killed in Montrouge in a southern suburb of Paris, on January 8. Investigation authorities linked the incident to the Charlie Hebdo attack on January 9. On the day, a man who took hostages at a kosher supermarket and was shot to death by special forces was identified as having been involved in the policewoman killing in Montrouge. In the series of terror attacks, a total of 17 people died.

The shockwaves of the French terror incident, described as the French 9/11, were great. Immediately after the incident, the French government made clear its attitude of fighting against terrorism and put the country on high alert. On January 12, the government announced the deployment of some 10,000 troops against terrorism within the country. On January 13, French Prime Minister Manuel Valls declared France's war against terrorism in the lower house and began to enhance anti-terrorism measures at home and abroad. A movement to pray for the terror attack victims and defend freedom of expression and speech grew throughout France. On January 11, 1.6 million people marched through Paris. On a nationwide basis, 3.7 million people joined in marches for the movement. More than 40 foreign country leaders, including British Prime Minister David Cameron and German Prime Minister Angela Merkel, participated in the Paris march, demonstrating their solidarity with France.

Messages condemning terrorism and offering condolences to France came not only from other Western countries but also from the rest of the world including Middle Eastern and Islamic countries. Many Muslim organizations denounced the terror attacks. At the same time, however, harassment and violence against Muslims and Islamic mosques occurred in various locations in France apparently in retaliation for the terror attacks, creating a situation of grave concern. The terror attacks are feared to trigger serious impacts including adverse effects on social stability, spread of anti-Muslim sentiment, loss of the spirit of reconciliation and toleration, and stimulation of religious and racial disputes.

Middle Eastern and Islamic countries' condemnation of terrorism is unshaken, as noted above. But they may be resisting any moves to insult the prophet and Islam. It may be needless to note that terror and violence cannot be forgiven and that freedom of expression and the press must be respected. But whether freedom of expression allows for anything to be forgiven may have to be questioned. On January 12, a special edition of the Charlie Hebdo magazine after the terror attacks carried a cartoon depicting a prophet with a card saying, "I am Charlie." This invited repercussions mainly from the Islamic community again. Freedom of expression through cartoons has history and significance. As recommended by Pope Francis on January 15, however, people should essentially refrain from provoking or insulting other people's faith.

While the French incident is feared to spread anti-Muslim sentiment mainly in Western countries, worries about the growing Western anti-Muslim sentiment are expected to grow along with dissatisfaction with and opposition to insulting the faith in the Islamic world. If frictions between Western countries and the Islamic world grow to deepen their structural confrontation, it may affect world peace and stability. The vicious circle of growing repercussions and hate may be the goal that terrorists want to achieve in a sense. While France has been put on high alert since the incident, some terrorist groups have indicated new attacks. Fears of more terror attacks are growing not only in France but also in the rest of the world. Following the 9/11 terrorist attack, the United States entered its war against terrorism, fighting the Afghan and Iraq wars. These anti-terrorism wars have caused heavy sacrifices, burdens and costs for not only the United States but all relevant countries. How will the terror incident develop and affect the world? The answer is uncertain at present and cannot be found easily. Undoubtedly, however, the question will emerge as a new risk to shake the international situation.

In the present international energy situation, the easing supply-demand balance (and price drops) is the most important and interest-worthy issue symbolized by the rapid fall in crude oil prices. However, behind the easing supply-demand balance are many risk factors that could lead to future destabilization. Among them are geopolitical risks, including the Middle East situation represented

by the Islamic State problem, as well as the Ukraine problem. But we must take note of the fact that the terror incident is producing new risk factors shaking the international energy situation by destabilizing the international community, including the Middle East and the Islamic world.

Contact: report@tky.ieej.or.jp

The back issues are available at the following URL

http://eneken.ieej.or.jp/en/special_bulletin.html