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Firms appeal to Muslims with halal food

BY [REPORT FROM THE YOMIURI SHIMBUN](#)

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TOKYO: With markets expanding in Muslim countries, a number of Japanese companies see the production of halal foods and other products as a passport to the Islamic world, even though this might mean the complete renovation of a factory.

Halal, an Arabic term meaning “permissible”, is used to designate the preparation of food Muslims are allowed to eat according to Islamic law. Other products also must contain ingredients that are considered halal.

Cattle and chickens are slaughtered and processed using a special method, which is accompanied by an Islamic prayer. Pork and alcohol are totally forbidden.

Halal authentication bodies have received applications from Japanese companies that want to produce halal products for Islamic countries. The number of restaurants and university cafeterias offering halal dishes is also increasing.

“Halal is a passport to Islamic countries,” Akmal Abu Hassan, 43, a Malaysian living in Japan, said at a forum held in Saitama in mid-February. About 150 people from companies thinking of expanding into Islamic countries attended the forum.

Hassan, who runs a company to help Japanese companies develop halal products, said: “(Islamic countries are) a promising future market. This is a good opportunity (to develop halal products).”

The number of Muslims is expected to exceed two billion in 2030. Two of the largest Muslim countries, Indonesia and Bangladesh, are expected to chalk up growth rates of 6%.

In anticipation of the future huge market, Japanese companies scrambling to receive halal authentication are on the increase.

However, it is not easy for a company to meet the requirements.

An association official said: “In some cases, it is necessary to totally renovate a factory.” Only five applications have been approved over the past three years, the official said.

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At a spice manufacturing company in Ageo, Saitama prefecture, which received halal authentication from another organisation, part of its factory was renovated to produce halal products exclusively.

Kazuto Inoue, 73, who runs the company, is busily developing halal products. "The Muslim market is very attractive," he said.

The tourism industry also has its eye on Muslim countries.

According to the Japan National Tourism Organisation (JNTO), the number of tourists from Indonesia last year increased by nearly 60% compared to visitors from that country in 2007.

The Japan Halal Association said the number of restaurants offering halal dishes has increased rapidly over past 10 years. Currently, about 200 restaurants across the nation offer halal dishes.

Takayuki Ishihara, manager of the Gyumon barbecue restaurant in Shibuya Ward, Tokyo, which offers halal meat, said, "I hope mutual understanding will deepen between Muslims and Japanese by dining here."

The JNTO, which plans to open an office in Indonesia in May, is preparing booklets to introduce Japanese restaurants offering halal dishes and places where Muslims can pray, an official said.

A restaurant on the University of Tokyo's Hongo campus prepares a daily halal dish, such as chicken cooked in tomato sauce and beef curry.

The restaurant staff have discussed menus with Muslim students, and separate cooking utensils are used to prepare halal dishes from those needed for other dishes. An oven is set aside for halal dishes.

According to the National Federation of University Co-operative Associations, seven other universities prepare halal dishes.

Chukyo University Prof Ryoichi Namikawa, who has written a book about the concept of halal, said: "People may have become more interested in Muslim countries because of China's economic slowdown. To understand Muslim countries, an understanding of halal is essential."

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