

Remarks by H.E. Mr. MIZUUCHI Ryuta, Ambassador of Japan to the Republic of Zambia on the Occasion of Japan's National Day/61st Birthday of H.M. the Emperor of Japan

Honourable Dora Siliya, Minister of Information and Broadcasting Services,
High ranking officials from the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting Services,
Representatives from Media Houses,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

1. Introduction

I am so happy to meet with you today, Honourable Minister, albeit virtually, to exchange messages of friendship and cooperation between the Governments and peoples of Japan and Zambia, and to celebrate the birthday of H.M. the Emperor of Japan, who turns 61 on 23rd February.

Annually, we host our National Day reception at my residence, inviting Ministers, MPs and high-ranking officials from the Government, colleagues from the diplomatic corps, and representatives from various sectors including economy, academia, art and culture. However, the current situation of COVID-19 pandemic makes our lives difficult. And who would have thought that the very fact that last year we had our record-high number of guests at our reception has now made us realise that we cannot go on that way, simply to prevent that much of a crowd from taking place! Therefore, I am particularly grateful to Hon. Minister Siliya for having accepted our request to jointly – and virtually – look back on our bilateral relationship and look ahead. For, the 61st birthday of H.M. the Emperor of Japan on 23rd February happens to mark a special anniversary, namely the 440th anniversary of Japan-Africa exchanges. I will come back to this point later in my speech.

2. Imperial Household

Let me recall that the Imperial Family of Japan has been remarkably close to the Zambian people. As early as 1983, then the Crown Prince and the Princess, today Their Majesties the Emperor Emeritus and the Empress Emerita, visited

Zambia. In 1999, Their Imperial Highnesses Prince and Princess Takamado visited Zambia and opened Prince Takamado School in Bauleni Compound in Lusaka, one of the eight elementary schools built by grant assistance from Japan. In 2014, on the occasion of Zambia's Golden Jubilee and the 50th Anniversary of diplomatic relations between Japan and Zambia, Prince and Princess Akishino, today Their Imperial Highnesses Crown Prince and Princess, visited Zambia as State Guests. As the Symbol of the Japanese nation, Their Majesties the Emperor and the Empress cherish extremely high popularity among the Japanese people even today.

3. Retrospect on the past year 2020~2021

It looks as if it was only yesterday that I had the honour of welcoming H.E. Dr. Kenneth Kaunda, the first President of the Republic of Zambia, Honourable Vincent Mwale, Minister of Housing and Infrastructure Development as the Guest of Honour and other Ministers and VIPs at our National Day reception last year. I still remember vivid conversations of those enjoying Japanese culture such as tea ceremony, and of course, Japanese food.

(1) COVID-19

Since then, a lively diplomatic life in Lusaka has ceased to exist. Masking and social distancing became the people's² new code of conduct. As many people started to work from home, so did our Embassy, including myself. This is indeed a challenge, in the truest sense of the word. But still, I admire that despite the second wave of the pandemic, the Zambian Government and people are doing their utmost to master this challenge. The mortality rate (1.4%) is extremely low by international comparison. The rate of recovery marking around 90% of those infected, is simply amazing. I take this opportunity to express my heartfelt appreciation to the frontline doctors and medical workers for their, indeed, tireless dedication and service day and night. Transparency is the key to tackle this challenge, and I do appreciate the efforts of the Government of Zambia in providing detailed daily updates, including your own self, Honourable Minister.

In this time of difficulty, I was also pleased to stand side by side with Zambia in that effort in the healthcare sector. I signed and exchanged Notes with

Hon. Minister of Finance, Dr. Bwalya Ng'andu on two important projects: one on the upgrading of two Health Centres on the Copperbelt to First Level Hospitals, the other on the provision of modern medical equipment, including Oxygen Generators and Portable Digital X-ray Machines. The three Second Level Hospitals in Lusaka, built in Japanese hands over the past four years, will be handed over soon. All these projects, I am sure, will greatly contribute to strengthening the medical infrastructure of Zambia in the future.

(2) Debt sustainability

Zambia is one of the few countries in Africa which has kept its borders open and its economy running while, at the same time, implementing measures to contain the viral disease. Although the economy was severely hit by the COVID-19, I have been observing how the Zambian Government, under the leadership of H.E. President Edgar Chagwa Lungu, and the management of Honourable Finance Minister Ng'andu, has been working on the economic and financial front. The measures to ease the economic impact by financial package and incentives for severed economic sectors have been well thought out despite the low liquidity in the portfolio. More importantly, the Government's efforts to achieve the debt sustainability are correct and should be encouraged. It is also striving to enhance the basis of sustainable development by, for example, creating the value chain in industrial and agricultural products domestically or human resources development in engineering, science and technology. All these, once again, with full transparency. It is for this reason that I fully support Zambia's efforts, in particular, concerning debt sustainability issues. I also welcome on-going dialogues between the Government and IMF which, I hope, will bear fruit soon.

4. Looking ahead to 2021

Without doubt, the year 2021 will be another tough year for all of us. But the vaccines are on their way, raising the hope that COVID-19 will be within reach of manageable levels. And hopefully, the Zambian economy will prove robust enough to allow a little more breathing space for the Government to deal with the debt sustainability issue with the assistance of G20, including Japan. It is also my

sincere hope that the election scheduled to take place in August this year and all the preparations leading to that will prove free and fair, strengthening the democracy in this great nation. I am a strong believer in the people of Zambia on their way to this supreme goal. For my part, I am looking forward to working closely together with you all, with a view to achieving a sustainable economic development and uplifting the livelihood of the people.

5. 440th Anniversary of Japan-Africa Exchanges

Now, let me come back to the 440th anniversary of Japan-Africa exchanges. Many of you may recall that I brought to your attention last year the story of the “first African Samurai” by the name of “Yasuke.” It was indeed 440 years ago, on 23rd of February (lunar calendar), that the man from Africa, having travelled to Japan with the Jesuit missionary, was taken up by Oda Nobunaga, and given the name “Yasuke” and a rank in his clan. As we aim to emerge victorious from COVID19 in the next couple of months, we would like to welcome you to a number of events celebrating this special year. Honourable Minister, may I call on you to become a patron of this special year and join me in my efforts to make Japan more visible in Zambia and further deepen our friendship?

6. Conclusion

Honourable Minister, last but not least, let me once again express my sincere appreciation for taking your precious time to hold a virtual exchange of messages with me on the occasion of Japan’s National Day, the birthday of H. M. the Emperor of Japan. It will be my pleasure to continue working closely together in the year to come with your Government and people, a nation full of potentials.

Thank you very much for your attention.