

# Norway national day

## Norway is also here to help

Arne Walther  
AMBASSADOR OF NORWAY

Today is Norway's National Day. Rather than celebrating the occasion with military parades and political manifestations, we celebrate our constitution and independence with parades of happy children waving flags, cheering their local school bands, singing our national anthem and honoring our king. It is a true celebration of peace, joy and optimism for the future, with ice cream, waffles and hot dogs, children's favorites, being the food of the day for adults as well.



At the height of spring, our National Day also coincides with the renewal of nature as we look forward to the rewards and leisure of summer after a long and cold winter. But in this annual spring-time display of national pride and contentment, we also pause to look beyond our borders to those less fortunate, to the many people suffering in a world of widespread poverty and injustice, of death and destruction due to armed conflict and of recurring natural disasters as well.

This year Norwegians in Tokyo will again gather to celebrate our National Day, but in a different way: This time with food produced in Tohoku in addition to the waffles, hot dogs and ice cream; this time mindful of the great natural disaster that so mercilessly has struck Japan and her people, the country that we are living in, the people, our friends, whom we so admire and respect.

### A time to reaffirm ties

This moment in the wake of the Great East Japan Earthquake is surely a time to reaffirm, revitalize and renew the close ties be-

tween our two countries and people. It is a time for Norway and Norwegians to stretch out our hands to help and work with the Japanese people and authorities not only in immediate disaster relief, but also in longer-term reconstruction efforts.

When the mega-catastrophe struck Japan on March 11, His Majesty King Harald of Norway immediately offered his condolences to His Imperial Majesty Emperor Akihito. The ties between our heads of state are close. They met each other as crown princes, when then Crown Prince Harald first came to Japan in 1964 to participate in a sailing event at the Summer Olympics. In 2001, he came back, this time as king, on an official state visit. Their Imperial Majesties Emperor Akihito and Empress Michiko went to Norway on a return state visit in 2005, the year we celebrated the centenary of our independence in modern times.

Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg of Norway likewise immediately sent his condolences to Prime Minister Naoto Kan to convey his sympathy to those bereaved and offering to support Japan in any way we could. Our prime minister had been looking forward to his official visit to Japan, which was to have commenced four days later on March 15 with a large accompanying delegation of Norway's foremost businessmen to strengthen established ties and to seize new potential in our bilateral relationship in areas of fisheries and shipping, energy and environment, as well as science and technology. The visit was postponed under the tragic circumstances of natural disaster to a time better suited in the near future, when it will be implemented with renewed purpose. Other Cabinet ministers have likewise sent their mes-

sages of sympathy to their counterparts in Japan.

A couple of weeks ago, I had the honor of meeting with the Speaker of the House of Representatives Takahiro Yokomichi and the President of the House of Councilors Takeo Nishioka to convey letters from the President of the Norwegian parliament Dag Terje Andersen with condolences and sympathy on behalf of the members of parliament following the disaster. The Standing Committee on Health and Welfare of parliament is planning to visit Japan after the summer, following up on the important and successful visit of the parliament's Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defense.

### A flow of sympathy

Such political-level sentiments are, as we have seen by the flow of sympathy to Japan from all around the world, not unique to Norway. In addition to their bilateral relations with Japan, countries rich and poor, near and afar, appreciate Japan as a positive force in international cooperation in the United Nations and other forums for nuclear disarmament and sustainable development. Japan has been active and generous in helping others in long-term international development aid and shorter-term disaster relief. Now is the time for the world to help Japan in return. The sympathy shown and support offered to Japan by the international community is impressive and deeply felt in Norway as elsewhere.

As did many other countries, Norway immediately offered search and rescue teams to assist in the areas affected by the tsunami. Our experts participated in assessment teams from the United Nations, the European Union and the International Red Cross to prepare for target-

ed relief efforts in dialogue with Japanese authorities and organizations to the disaster-struck areas. We are prepared to assist in other ways as well.

### Displays of empathy

Back home in Norway, solidarity concerts and other people-to-people displays of empathy were spontaneously organized, including the Gift to Japan Concert attended by our Crown Princess Mette-Marit, and our biathlon athletes, upon winning the World Championship in Russia, donating all their prize money to Japan, matched by a similar donation by their athletic federation.

In the first few weeks after the disaster, Norwegian chapters of international relief organizations, such as the Red Cross, Save the Children and the Church Relief Fund, transferred to their Japanese sister organizations more than ¥250 million collected from responsive Norwegians who care. These funds

are being dispersed in the way their Japanese counterpart organizations, who know best what local needs are, consider most effective. Some of this aid was also directly earmarked, such as the 5,500 school bags with books and writing material handed out by Save the Children Norway in Ishinomaki, Miyagi Prefecture, two weeks ago.

The Norwegian company Normeca is now setting up two semipermanent hospital units in Iwate Prefecture. Likewise, state-of-the-art Norwegian technology and expertise in renewable energy and the environment could make an important contribution to the reconstruction efforts.

### The coastal challenge

In terms of area, Norway is the size of Japan. In terms of population, we are far, far fewer, with only 4.8 million people. On the opposite side of the Eurasian landmass, we too have a long coastline scattered with communities dependent on fisheries. Living by the sea, we know that the sea can be generous as we harvest its bounty. Having lost many lives at sea, we have also learned to respect its forces.

The tsunamis show how cruel the sea can be and how devastating is its force. People in our coastal communities can visualize more easily than others the effects of tsunamis. Their empathy with coastal brethren in Japan is strong.

Fisheries, seafood safety and other marine activities as well as maritime industry stand out as important pillars of Norwegian-Japanese cooperation. These areas, where Norwegian experience and expertise is strong, will be important also in the coordinated reconstruction efforts of Japanese authorities in the northeast. Our Minister of Fisheries and Coastal Affairs Lisbeth Berg-Hansen, who was to have participated in the planned visit of our prime minister in March, is looking very much forward to visiting Japan soon, not just to promote our fisheries cooperation, but also very much mindful of the challenges facing Japan in reconstructing devastated coastal areas. With coastal communities ourselves, we understand and deal with their unique challenges and have experience to share.

### A global concern

Natural disasters strike without recognizing national borders and show no respect for religion or political systems. In the face of natural disaster, the human race is one. When disaster does strike, as it will again, the global community, governments, non-governmental organizations and ordinary people must stand readily prepared to lend a hand in common effort.

In January 2005, 10 years after the earthquake disaster in Kobe, Japan hosted the United Nations World Conference on Disaster Relief Reduction, which adopted the Hyogo Framework for Action 2005-2015. This milestone in international collaboration for natural disaster risk management has clearly in-

creased awareness of the importance of preventive measures. Norway and Japan are working closely together in this forum, which only last week in Geneva held the third session of the Global Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction.

What has been done in Japan so far in the wake of a terrible disaster and the work that remains for a long time to come in reconstructing the devastated areas will give valuable experience that other countries will appreciate Japan to share, when disaster strikes elsewhere and when international experience, efforts and good will are required in relief and reconstruction again. When that time comes Norway will be working hand in hand with Japan and others to assist.

## Congratulations

on

*the Norwegian Constitution Day*

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