

Benin national day

Working as partners toward stable democratic, economic future

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AMBASSADOR OF BENIN

The West African country Benin Republic celebrates today, Aug. 1, its 54th independence anniversary. On this unique occasion, on behalf of H.E. President Yayi Boni Thomas, his government and the people of the Benin Republic, I consider this a special opportunity to send out a message of goodwill to Their Imperial Majesties Emperor Akihito and Empress Michiko, H.E. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, the government and to all those who are devoting themselves to promoting friendly relations between our peoples. Beninese people continue to express sympathy and brotherhood toward the Japanese who suffered from the March 11, 2011, Great East Japan Earthquake and tsunami.

Good governance

We should not forget that the administration of President Yayi Boni aims to transform Benin's economy into one of the emerging economies and the political system into a modern one.

In a move to achieve its goals, Benin organized an economic round table in Paris from June 17 to 19, at the end of which bilateral and multilateral public and private partners pledged to support Benin with \$12 billion to finance the various programs and projects. The goal over the next five years is to accelerate economic growth to reach at least an 8 percent increase and to raise the current investment rate of 19 percent to 28 percent.

Among these partners called upon to support the various programs and projects, my country, Benin, knows it can count on Japan and many other Asia Pacific countries.

Indeed, the good cooperative relations so happily existing between Japan and Benin, since the establishment of diplomatic

relations in 1961, is the result of constructive political dialogue established between the Highest Authorities of our two countries, namely President Yayi Boni and Prime Minister Shinzo Abe.

It is glorifying that these reforms and policies have begun to bear tangible fruits in repositioning the economy and has become one of the preferred destinations for foreign direct investment (FDI) in Africa. The results of these reforms have quickly made Benin a stable, peaceful and democratic reference in Africa. Thanks to all including Japan, Benin has never in history faced civil wars. Because of this, President Yayi Boni received two years ago from his colleagues of Africa a mandate as chairperson of the African Union (January through December 2012).

Since then President Yayi Boni has been strengthening peace and democracy in Africa. Therefore, the African Union needs the support of the international community, of which Japan is an important member, for all the decisions toward democracy and peace in the world.

Japan and the Republic of Benin have developed and maintained excellent relations over the years since 1960, and today Japan has become a leading partner in our development effort.

Friendly relationship

Last year President Yayi Boni paid two official visits to Japan. The first one was a state visit in March and the second one was his participation in the fifth Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD V) in June.

Japanese official development assistance (ODA) to Benin, both in grants and loans, has been critical in the visible improvements achieved in our economic infrastructure, health delivery system, educational facilities and agricultural extension services over the last few years.

My objectives as ambassador



Friendship: Benin President Yayi Boni and Prime Minister Shinzo Abe greet each other during the fifth Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD V) in Yokohama in June, 2013. COURTESY OF SHINZO ABE

extraordinary and plenipotentiary to Japan are to improve upon and also expand this positive and mutually beneficial relationship between Japan and the Republic of Benin. Several high-ranking personalities of the new administration in Benin visited Japan and had discussions with their Japanese counterparts, while senior Japanese

parliamentary lawmakers, including the senior vice justice minister, visited Benin.

Government officials in turn visited Benin in order to continue gaining firsthand knowledge and understanding of the situation on the ground to help formulate appropriate responses to our country's development needs. As indicated above, Ja-

pan's

ODA to Benin over the past years has helped lay the basis of the socioeconomic infrastructure in terms of efficient ports and harbors.

Investors welcome

The Japanese government alone cannot, however, fully bear the burden of reconstruction of the Benin Republic, to provide for the needs and aspirations of its population. The private sector such as Keidanren and JETRO and society (NPOs or NGOs) at large are urged to increasingly invest their enormous material resources and expertise in Benin's market, which is the gateway of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and its 350 million consumers.

The recent visit in January of Senior Vice Justice Minister Shinsuke Okuno to the Benin Republic was highly appreciated by both the government and people of Benin. This will help to alleviate poverty and reduce frustration and tension not only in Benin but also in West African countries, maybe even for the whole African continent. Benin is awaiting Japanese investors in all fields from agro-industry to tertiary services.

It is therefore clearly in the interest of both countries to work toward a more balanced eco-

nomical relationship with increased trade. Benin has oil, cotton, gold mining, quarries, shea butter, pineapples and many other resources.

My appeal to Japanese and Asia Pacific investors and entrepreneurs in the private sector is to look beyond their immediate neighborhood of Southeast Asia, positively target the almost untapped natural resources (the Republic of Benin has many raw materials in its soil) and investment opportunities in Africa and become development partners even as the Japanese government is a partner in the public sector.

The economic position of Benin is reinforced by its membership in the large market of ECOWAS mentioned above. Given Benin's economic potential and its human resources, I am confident our cooperation will surely be strengthened and broadened with many other actions such as in the private sector where tourism, science and technology, new information and communications technology, textiles, energy and climate change offer real opportunities and are indicated for partnership.

Spiritual closeness

Let me take congratulation the technical assistance provided through the Japan International



Economic center: Cotonou in the southeast of Benin is the country's largest city, a transport hub and a gateway to a market of 300 million in West Africa. EMBASSY OF BENIN

Cooperation Agency (JICA); the action of Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers (JOCV); the dynamic Beninese NGOs such as the IFE Foundation, through which Japanese volunteers go to Benin Takeshi Japanese Language School (the only Japanese language school free of charge in Africa) to teach African people and all the foreigners in Benin Japanese language, culture and history.

Thanks to that, there are many students all over Japan who are majoring in agriculture, science, medicine, and information technologies.

Benin and Japan have many similarities concerning cultural values such as religions (Beninese voodoo and Japanese Shinto), languages' resemblance (Benin Yoruba and Fon have many words similar to Japa-

nese).

Japanese tourists are warmly welcomed in Benin's south to visit sites like the UNESCO World Heritage site, the Gate of No Return, which reminds us of the slavery-colonization history. In the middle of the country are the very famous royal palaces of the Abomey Kingdom and Dassa-Zoume Catholic pilgrimage site, while in the north, visitors are surrounded by the beauty formed by abundant natural resources, landscapes of rivers, fauna and the wonderful people of Benin.

Thank you very much and may God bless you in a very special way.

You can get in touch with the Benin Embassy through its website, www.beninembassy.jp. Email: abenintyo@beninem-bassy.jp.

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to the People of the Republic of Benin
on the Occasion of the 54th Anniversary of
Their Independence

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