

Benin national day

Benin awaits more Japanese partners in its development process

Zomahoun D.C. Rufin
AMBASSADOR OF BENIN

The West African country Benin Republic celebrates today, Aug. 1, its 53rd independence anniversary. On this auspicious occasion, on behalf of H.E. President Yayi Boni, head of state, and on behalf of his government and the people of the Benin Republic, I consider this a special opportunity to send out a message of good will to Their Imperial Majesties Emperor Akihito and Empress Michiko, H.E. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, to the government and to all those who are devoting themselves to promoting friendly relations between our peoples. Benin 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. 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. Because of

this, President Yayi Boni received last year 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 for 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

This year President Yayi Boni has already 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 the grant and loan forms, 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 extraordinary and plenipotentiary ambassador 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



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

senior Japanese parliamentary lawmakers and vice ministers of foreign affairs 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, Japan'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 like Keidanren and JETRO and civil 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 ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States) and its 350 million consumers. The recent visit in July of a JETRO delegation to the Benin Republic was highly appreciated by both the government and business community. 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 economic relationship with increased trade. Benin has oil, cotton, gold mining, stones, shea butter, etc.

My appeal to Japanese investors and entrepreneurs in the private sector is to look beyond their immediate neighborhood of Southeast Asia, positively target the almost untapped natural resources and investment opportunities in Africa (the Republic of Benin has all kinds of raw materials in its soil) 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 of the large market of ECOWAS (Economic Com-

munity of West African States) mentioned above. Given Benin's economic potential and its human resources, I am confident that 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

It is my pleasure to take the floor to congratulate very sincerely the Japanese people and the Japanese government for organizing TICAD V with big success. In his June 1 speech during TICAD V at the Pacifico in Yokohama, Prime Minister Abe pledged a huge amount of financial assistance to boost the African economy and eradicate poverty on the continent. Let me take the floor to congratulate the technical assistance provided through JICA (Japan International Cooperation Agency), the action of Japanese volunteers and the dynamic Beninese NGOs like the foundation IFE through which Japanese volunteers go to Benin Takeshi Japanese Language School (the only Japanese language school free of charge in Africa) to teach Japanese language, culture and history and so on. 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 like religions (Beninese voodoo and Japanese Shinto),



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

languages' resemblance (Benin Yoruba and Fon compared to many Japanese language words). Japanese tourists are warmly welcome to Benin's southern part to visit sites like the Gate of No Return, which reminds us of the slavery-colonization history; the UNESCO World Heritage and very famous royal palaces of the Abomey Kingdom and Dassa-Zoume catholic pilgrim site in

the middle part of Benin; and the north, which is surrounded by the beauty formed by abundant natural resources, landscapes of rivers, fauna and the captivated 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.

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