Pursuing robust ties, peace and prosperity

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Today, we celebrate the 30th anniversary of the independence of the Republic of Armenia. On Sept. 21, 1991, the people of Armenia held a nationwide referendum and declared the establishment of a new independent state, marking another milestone in the millennia-long history of a nation that is so proud of its historical heritage, unique language, distinctive culture and rich traditions.

On this commemorative day I extend my heartfelt congratulations to all our compatriots as well as to our friends in Japan and elsewhere in the world. In fact, Japan was among the first countries to recognize the new Armenian state. The diplomatic relations between our two nations were formally established on Sept. 7, 1992, and we are looking forward to celebrating the 30th anniversary of that date next year.

In the past 29 years, the friendly relations between Armenia and Japan have seen many positive developments. The mutual establishment of embassies in our capital cities, the active work of friendship groups in both the Armenian and Japanese parliaments, as well as the work of cultural and business groups and friendship associations have all been boosting our ties and reinforcing our partnership in many areas. Our bilateral relations have also been highlighted by various reciprocal visits. The most recent one was the visit to Japan of Armenian President H.E. Armen Sarkissian to express Armenia's support to the Japanese government and people for organizing the Olympic and Paralympic Games during these difficult times.

Even though there are many stories still to be uncovered about the historical connections between the Armenian and Japanese people, it is noteworthy to mention some of already revealed episodes. In particular, in 1922 an Armenian Relief Fund was established by prominent Japanese entrepreneur and philanthropist Eiichi Shibusawa, who greatly supported the survivors of the Armenian genocide. Another interesting story is about how the bread that Japanese call *melonpan* was invented. It is not a widely known fact, but melonpan was made for the first time by Armenian baker Hovhannes Sagoyan at the beginning of 20th century. Sagoyan is buried in the Yokohama Foreign General Cemetery.

In modern times, our collaboration with Japan and its assistance projects in Armenia are significantly helping to improve our economy and social infrastructure, and the Armenian people greatly appreciate the generous assistance of Japan. This year, the Japanese side once again extended its support to the Armenian people. On Feb. 16, the government of Japan decided to extend emergency grant aid of $3.6 million in response to the humanitarian crisis in Artsakh caused by military aggression against its peaceful people in autumn 2020. The heroic fight of the people of Artsakh in that war for the sake of its existence and identity is an example of patriotism, courage and endurance for all Armenians. And on this day, we bow before those who sacrificed their lives for its protection and freedom. The Republic of Armenia will consistently pursue the right of the people of Artsakh to self-determination, and to a free and dignified life in their homeland, as the only realistic basis for a just and lasting settlement to the conflict and sustainable peace in the region. Armenia reiterates the need to resume the process of peaceful settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict under the auspices of the OSCE Minsk Group co-chairmanship.

In the meantime, Armenia continues its path toward economic prosperity and democratization, which was reiterated by the snap parliamentary elections held in June. The economy of Armenia is steadily recovering from the challenges of 2020 and one of our priorities is the promotion of exports. Besides famous brands of wine, brandy and other products, Armenia is also exporting its innovative technologies. Being a regional hub on the world stage of information and innovation technologies, Armenia is home to branches of many leading companies in information technology, semiconductor design, blockchain technology, artificial intelligence and engineering. As an example, Armenia's home-grown IT companies, such as PicsArt, a unicorn company (privately held startup valued at more than $1 billion) that recently raised $130 million in a financing round led by SoftBank's Vision Fund 2 and plays a global role in the field.

Finally, Armenia's rich history, unique culture, UNESCO World Heritage sites, exquisite cuisine, classical and jazz music, beautiful nature, world-class hotels, warm hospitality and competitive prices make our country a fascinating holiday destination as well. Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, we are accepting tourists from all over the world, and our embassy in Japan is ready to support Japan's travel agents in raising awareness about our country.

On this celebratory occasion, I wish peace and prosperity to the people of Japan and the readers of The Japan Times. In these uncommon times of pandemic, let me also wish that all of us stay safe and healthy.

This content was compiled in collaboration with the embassy. The views expressed here do not necessarily reflect those of the newspaper.

Republic Square in Yerevan is the capital's centerpiece and hosts the Government House, History Museum and National Gallery of Armenia. EMBASSY OF ARMENIA

Biblical Mount Ararat is seen through the ruins of Zvartnots Cathedral in Vagharshapat, Armavir province. EMBASSY OF ARMENIA