

# Lithuania independence day

## Celebratory year for Lithuanian statehood

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It is my pleasure to address the readers of The Japan Times on the occasion of the 92nd anniversary of the declaration of the restoration of the State of Lithuania. Last year was full of commemorative events throughout the country and abroad as Lithuania entered the second millennium of its history. The capital Vilnius proudly carried the title of European Capital of Culture together with its Austrian partner city of Linz. However, this year will be no less important in highlighting events related to Lithuanian statehood. Besides the present day that



marks the restoration of the State of Lithuania, March 11 is among the most important dates in our history. This year March 11, which enshrines the restoration of independence from the Soviet Union, declared in 1990, will mark its 20th anniversary. It reminds us, though, that neither the issue of independence was immediately settled, nor the recognition by other states followed instantly. After Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev called the declaration illegal, the USSR applied an economic blockade against Lithuania. Moreover, there was even an attempt to return Lithuania to the Soviet Union by force, with the Soviet military storming Vilnius and leaving 14 people dead and around 700 injured.

We will be eternally grateful to tiny Iceland, which was the

first to recognize Lithuanian independence, followed by Denmark in a couple of weeks. And only after the failed 1991 Soviet coup, when U.S. President George H.W. Bush announced that if Russia were to use armed force against Lithuania, the U.S. would react accordingly, was Lithuania's independence recognized by the Soviet Union at last.

Another big celebration will revolve around the 600th anniversary of the Battle of Grunwald, or *Zalgirio musis*. It took place on July 15, 1410, and was one of the most important battles in medieval Europe, as it ended the two-centuries-long offensive by the Teutonic Order against the Eastern Baltic lands. That day, Grand Duke Vytautas led the Kingdom of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania in alliance against



**Victory: Commemorative medal of the 1410 Battle of Grunwald, or *Zalgirio musis*.**

the knights of the Teutonic Order, and the superiority of the alliance was overwhelming. The defeat of the Order was resounding and it never recovered its former power again. And the victory opened the doors for the Grand Duchy of Lithuania to establish normal

relations with many European countries.

Certainly to all Lithuanians, the victory at *Zalgirio musis* is a matter of pride and reminds us of the peak of the political and military power of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. The term "*Zalgiris*" has become a symbol of power and resistance to foreign domination, and the victories of the basketball club *Zalgiris* Kaunas against the Soviet Army sports club CSKA Moscow in the late 1980s served as a major emotional inspiration for Lithuanian national revival.

However, by celebrating its 600th anniversary my country seeks to remind the world not about the battle as such but rather highlight it as a cultural fact revealing the features of an active Lithuanian state. Combats can be commemo-

rated in a peaceful manner, so that the historic past would not cause any more enmity — on the contrary, it could serve for building bridges between nations. In July, thousands of medieval re-enactors from all over Europe in knight's armor will traditionally gather at the Grunwald fields in Poland to reconstruct the battle. Besides this, a historic conference with experts from Germany and Poland, concerts, youth camps and other events will be held on this occasion.

Reflecting on the key moments of its history, Lithuania takes every effort to contribute to the U.N. Millennium Development Goals of peace, economic growth and social stability, and the reduction of disparities between countries and regions. Taking advantage of its own experience, since July 2009 Lithuania has been chairing the Community of Democracies and holds the presidency of the Council of the Baltic Sea States. Next year, my country

will become the first Baltic state to chair the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). Besides this, Lithuania is effectively contributing to building bridges between Europe and Asia, too — last October, the first-ever ASEM (Asia-Europe Meeting) Transport Ministers' Meeting was held in Vilnius.

Last but not least, the Lithuanian military takes part in peacekeeping operations in such remote areas as Afghani-

stan, contributing to the reconstruction of its Ghor Province. It is worth mentioning that the Lithuanian-led Provincial Reconstruction Team in Afghanistan is now the only one of among 26 to which the government of Japan has dispatched its civilians. This is a great example of how two remote countries can join their efforts in the rebuilding of the security and well-being of peoples who are in need of immediate attention and assistance.

**Congratulations  
on the Independence Day of  
the Republic of Lithuania**



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