

Benin national day

Working toward stable democracy and strong economic future

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AMBASSADOR OF BENIN

Located in West Africa, Benin Republic celebrates today, Aug. 1, its 55th 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.

It is an honor for both the Benin government and Beninese people to welcome today — during the national anniversary — H.E. Minoru Kiuchi, state minister for foreign affairs, among many foreign dignitaries attending our national day celebration.

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 an emerging one and the political system into a modern one.

In a move to achieve this purpose, Benin organized an economic round table in Paris in June last year, at the end of which bilateral and multilateral public and private partners pledged to support Benin with \$12 billion to finance various projects and programs. The goal through 2019 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 pro-

grams and projects, my country, Benin, knows it can count on Japan and many other Asia Pacific countries.

Indeed, the good cooperative relations, which have existed so happily between Japan and Benin since the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1961, are the result of constructive political dialogue established between the highest authorities of our two countries, namely President Yayi Boni and Prime Minister Abe.

It is glorifying that these reforms and policies have begun to bear tangible fruit in repositioning the economy and Benin has become one of the preferred destinations for foreign direct investment 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 war. Because of this, President Yayi Boni received three 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 decisions toward democracy and peace in the world.

Friendly relationship

Japan and the Republic of Benin have developed and maintained excellent relations over the years since 1961, and today Japan has become a leading partner in our development effort.

President Yayi Boni has visited Japan several times as a state and official visit. The last visit was his participation in the fifth Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD V).

My objectives as 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-



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

ranking members of the new administration in Benin visited Japan and had discussions with their Japanese counterparts,

while the prime minister, Cabinet members and senior Japanese parliamentary lawmakers visited Benin in order to con-

tinue gaining firsthand knowledge and understanding of the situation on the ground to help formulate appropriate responses to our country's development needs.

Let me take this opportunity to note my appreciation for the technical assistance provided through the Japan International 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; and the 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 technology.

Development assistance

Japanese official development assistance 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.

It has helped lay the basis of the socioeconomic infrastructure in terms of efficient ports

and harbors.

Investors welcome

The Japanese government alone cannot fully bear the burden of reconstruction of the Benin Republic and provide for the needs and aspirations of the people of Benin. The private sector such as Keidanren and JETRO and civil society, including NPOs and 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.

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, 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 and proactively target the nearly untapped natural resources (the Republic of Benin has many raw materials in the ground).

The economic position of Benin is reinforced by its membership in the large market of



Cotonou in the southeast of Benin is the country's largest city, a transport hub and a gateway to a market of 350 million in West Africa. EMBASSY OF BENIN

ECOWAS (350 million consumers) 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 for partnership.

Spiritual closeness

Benin and Japan have many similarities concerning cultural values such as religions (Beninese voodoo and Japanese Shinto), resemblances in language (Benin Yoruba and Fon have many words similar to Japanese).

Japanese tourists are warmly welcomed in Benin's south to visit sites such as 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@beninembassy.jp.

Congratulations
to the People of
the Republic of Benin
on the Occasion of
the 55th Anniversary of
Their Independence

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