

Message from H. E. Mr. MARUYAMA Norio, Ambassador of Japan to the Republic of South Africa, on the occasion of the birthday of His Majesty the Emperor

23 February 2021
Third year of Reiwa

Today we celebrate, for the second time, the birthday of His Majesty the Emperor after his accession to the Throne in May 2019, the first year of Reiwa.

COVID-19 has led the whole world into an unprecedented situation since last year and as a result of this situation, it is with my deep regret that this year I had to abandon to hold our annual reception celebrating His Majesty's birthday.

Nevertheless, I would like to take this opportunity to share, through this message, my thoughts of relations between Japan and South Africa with everyone who has shown an interest in Japan.

It is almost one year since the first case of COVID-19 was confirmed in South Africa, and I would like to express my heartfelt condolences to those who have lost their beloved family members and friends as a result of COVID-19. I would also like to pay tribute to the medical professionals and essential workers who are working day and night to fight against this 'invisible enemy'. I also wish a speedy recovery to those who are currently under treatment.

I would also like to express my sincere respect to H.E. President Ramaphosa for his outstanding leadership in guiding the country through this unprecedented situation, and to the Minister of Health, the Honorable Mr. Mkhize, and other South African government officials who are working with the President to ensure the safety of all the people.

Since the national lockdown came into effect in South Africa, some Japanese citizens staying in South Africa chose to be repatriated to Japan in April last year and the repatriation operation continued over several months. Despite such an unprecedented situation, those Japanese citizens were able to make their return safely. I would like to take this opportunity to again thank the South African Government and all those involved.

With regard to the fight against COVID-19, Japan commends the efforts of the United Nations organization. The UN was one of the first to call for urgent assistance to South Africa, in April last year. The Government of Japan quickly responded to this appeal. So far, Japan has funded several projects and has contributed around \$4m to South Africa, for projects conducted by the UNDP, UN Women and UNIDO, as well as for projects conducted by IFRC (the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies) which has similar type of support to South Africa.

Japanese companies operating in South Africa have provided face shields and masks to hospitals and schools. Toyota has donated over 100,000 face shields. They have also contributed toward PCR testing equipment, the renovation of hospitals, and has provided vehicles and food parcels for vulnerable communities. I would like to express my appreciation for their dedication.

Japan will continue to cooperate with the health response to COVID-19.

The year 2019 was a year of unprecedented splendour and importance for Japan-South Africa relations. Among others, South Africa's victory in the Rugby World Cup hosted in Japan was not only a historic moment for the people of South Africa, but also a great opportunity to tighten the bonds between the people of the two countries. Most notably, President Ramaphosa visited Japan three times during the year, an unprecedented event in the history of Japan-South Africa relations.

Given all the above remarkable developments, the year 2020 should have seen a further boost in relations between the two countries. However, due to COVID-19, numerous opportunities were lost. Nevertheless, despite such difficulties, we had several occasions to realise bilateral cooperation through various efforts throughout last year. The culmination of these efforts was the Japan-South Africa Foreign Ministers Meeting held in Pretoria at the end of last year.

Despite many constraints, Mr. MOTEGI Toshimitsu, Minister for Foreign Affairs, physically travelled to South Africa and held a bilateral ministerial meeting and working lunch with Dr. Naledi Pandor, Minister of International Relations and Cooperation. The two Ministers exchanged their views on a wide range of issues and agreed to further enhance our bilateral relations. During his stay, Minister Motegi also received a telephone call from President Ramaphosa, who extended his heartfelt welcome to Minister MOTEGI on his visit to South Africa.

This year, we will continue to make every effort to strengthen our cooperation in various areas, including the Japan-South Africa Partnership Forum, the Japan-South Africa Business Forum and the Japan-South Africa Joint Committee on Science and Technology, which have until now been postponed due to COVID-19.

It is a crucial theme for South Africa as to how they can achieve a resilient recovery from COVID-19. President Ramaphosa reiterated at the SoNA 2021 that the priority for the economic recovery of South Africa is to strengthen export competitiveness and boost domestic production. The President pointed out the crucial role of the manufacturing sector to promote investment and employment. He also stressed the importance of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) which started this year. His priority attracted my attention because Japan is a major contributor to all those areas.

Skills development is our long-term commitment. Japanese support for Kaizen and TVET skills development training for fitters and turners will help South Africa's manufacturing sector, especially the automotive industry, to become more competitive.

Empowerment of small-scale farmers is our concern. Japan has been committing to a small-scale farmers self-reliance program, Smallholder Horticulture Empowerment & Promotion (SHEP), which supports small farms run by disadvantaged people.

To the President's announcement of public sector reform, called Operation Vulindlela, which is indispensable for the resilient recovery of the economy of South Africa, Japan has been responding by providing technical assistance on water resources management. A handover ceremony of the Infrastructure Branch Training Center (IBTC) yard is being planned for next month.

In terms of investment and employment promotion, Japanese companies have invested a total of five billion USD in South Africa since 2013, and also created 150,000 jobs, mainly in the automotive industry.

A recent example of investment is Toyota's first production of hybrid vehicles in South Africa, which was specially mentioned by President Ramaphosa at the SoNA. This critical investment follows Nissan's Navara and Isuzu's D-MAX bakkie investments. Those Japanese companies are steadily implementing their commitment, despite COVID-19.

In addition to these three companies, NTT Data announced a Johannesburg data center investment last year. Just these four companies' total investment reaches approximately nine billion Rand. These new investments will also create many additional jobs.

I would like to commend the extraordinary efforts of Japanese companies to implement these projects, despite this difficult time.

AfCFTA will provide South Africa with greater access to markets across the continent, making South Africa a gateway to the continent. Japan is committed to actively pushing for the early installment of the One Stop Border Post (OSBP) at Beitbridge, through technical cooperation. I am confident that the OSBP project will ensure AfCFTA of becoming a truly attractive framework for foreign investors. It will further enhance the importance of South Africa as a gateway country for more than 150 Japanese companies in South Africa, doing business across the continent.

Unfortunately, we are unable to hold a physical event in celebration of the birthday of His Majesty the Emperor this year. Nevertheless, I would like to bring Japan closer to the people of South Africa on the occasion of this auspicious day, by celebrating Japan together online and on air.

For this purpose, we have filmed more than ten new short videos on Japan-South Africa relations and Japanese support for South Africa. I would like you to enjoy these videos to witness the friendship between Japan and South Africa. Ms. Lalla Hirayama is the host and Ms. Yvonne Chaka Chaka, and

other people who have close ties both to Japan and to South Africa, appear in the videos. Some of the initial episodes are already available at the following URL, and more will be added in the future.

(URL) <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCcPBlxTLdyOh4R1L7i3Wy2g>

For people who are familiar with National Day Celebrations, joyful attractions like lucky draws are always appreciated. To offer to our friends the same kind of enjoyment, not physically but on air this year, the Embassy of Japan will hold a quiz show on Radio 702 on FM 92.7 and FM 106, from the 1st to 5th of March, sometime between 3 and 6 PM every day, with Japanese companies sponsoring the show and providing prizes each time. I hope that you will take part in the challenge and win some prizes. I would like to express our sincere thanks to the following companies for their support of this program: Fujifilm South Africa, Toshiba, Mitsubishi Corporation and Taiyo Bussan.

This year, in March, it will be 10 years since the Great East Japan Earthquake. Once again I would like to express our condolences to the families of those who lost their lives. The Great East Japan Earthquake was a complex disaster of unprecedented scale, but thanks to the efforts of people in the affected areas and the efforts of various people, in Japan and from abroad, the reconstruction of the affected areas are making steady progress. Immediately after the earthquake, a rescue team from South Africa, the first emergency rescue team ever dispatched to Japan from Africa, arrived at Iwanuma City, Miyagi Prefecture. Today, Iwanuma City is the Host Town for Team SA for the Tokyo Olympics and Paralympics, and continues to engage in grassroots exchanges with South Africa.

The Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games, which were postponed last year, are now rescheduled for this July. All those involved in the Games are working together to ensure the success of the Games, taking all possible measures against COVID-19 and preparing in order to make the Games safe and secure. Recently the G7 leaders stated their support to the commitment of Japan to hold the Olympic and Paralympic Games Tokyo 2020 in a safe and secure manner this summer, as a symbol of global unity in overcoming COVID-19. The motto for the Olympics and Paralympics is 'United by Emotion'. We would like to share the excitement of sport with the people of South Africa who have become fans of Japan as a result of the Rugby World Cup.

I wish the world a speedy recovery from COVID-19 and a return to normal life. To this end, we will continue to maintain close relations between our two countries at all levels, and we will celebrate together when we have won this battle against COVID-19.

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