

Remarks by Reconstruction Minister Masahiro Imamura to the
Foreign Press Corps
“Reconstruction from the Great East Japan Earthquake”
(February 22, 2017, 17:30
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1. Introduction

Good evening. I am Masahiro Imamura, Minister for Reconstruction.

About seven months have passed since I assumed the office of the Minister. During this time, I have spoken with the heads of local governments and residents in areas affected by the Great East Japan Earthquake and have seen the current state of reconstruction.

We are extremely grateful to over 160 countries and regions and more than 40 international organizations for their support in various ways, from immediately after the earthquake and up to the present day. Even recently, a number of events related to the earthquake, such as art, sports, and cooking, have been carried out with the support of different countries. They all serve as encouragement for the people affected by the disaster.

Soon six years will have passed since March 11, 2011.

Today, there are three points that I would like to convey to you.

The first is that the reconstruction is steadily moving forward.

The second is a request for lifting of the food import restrictions.

And the third is the appeal of the Tohoku region as a sightseeing area.

2. Steady Progress of Reconstruction and Sharing Lessons Learned from the Disaster

Reconstruction is steadily moving ahead due to the efforts of people and local governments in disaster-affected areas, and abundant support from the international community.

Infrastructure such as schools, hospitals, and roads, has almost been rebuilt, and the number of evacuees has dropped from 470,000 to less than 130,000. We plan to relocate 20,000 residences to higher ground and to build 30,000 new public housings, and it will be almost completed by March 2019.

Our objective is to complete the reconstruction of tsunami-affected areas in Miyagi and Iwate in 10 years after the earthquake, that is, by March 2021. From here on, we will continue to rebuild livelihoods. I have met many people who are actively working to rebuild industries and livelihoods in affected areas. Hironoya in Hirono Town in Iwate Prefecture is handling sea urchins from Kitananriku-Area, but had suffered great damage from the earthquake. Today, the company has resumed business and conducts sales in overseas as well. In Minamisanriku Town in Miyagi Prefecture, after the disaster, shopkeepers have created a temporary shopping area called “Sun Sun Shopping Village.” Now, elevation work has been completed, and a new shopping area will be finished next month, becoming a symbol of reconstruction.

There have also been new economic developments that did not exist before the earthquake. The Pacific side of the Tohoku area is

poised to become an automobile industrial cluster; for example, in Ohira Village in Miyagi Prefecture, Toyota Motor East Japan has invested in facility development in plants using the special reconstruction zone system, and has added 1,600 employees at the factory, as well as created jobs for 2,000 people at affiliated companies. Because of the accessibility to the Northern Sea route (Arctic passage), ports in the Tohoku region may also become logistical bases in Japan.

Each time I visit the affected areas, I realize just how big the scale of the disaster was. However, Japan is a country that has continued to weather natural disasters. Since Japan has developed expertise on disaster prevention, disaster risk reduction, and reconstruction, we would like to share this knowledge with the international community. Two years ago, Japan hosted the UN World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction in Sendai. The reason why Japan took an initiative to establish World Tsunami Awareness Day in the UN was to help people in other countries understand Japan's experiences and to prioritize disaster prevention and reduction measures in the policies of each country.

3. Reconstruction in Fukushima

Next, I would like to speak about the situation in Fukushima, in which I believe you all have an interest. But first, I would like to touch upon the entire picture of Fukushima Prefecture.

Please also have a look at the pamphlet that we have handed out. English, Chinese, and Korean versions are also available.

The area of Fukushima Prefecture is wider than 13,000 km². It is the third largest prefecture in Japan; for example, it is wider than the territory of Qatar. Evacuation orders due to the nuclear accident cover 5% of the entire prefecture now. Daily life continues on as normal in the remaining 95%.

The air dose rates in 95% of Fukushima Prefecture are not much different from those in major cities around the world; rather, some of them are lower.

Even in areas within 80 km of the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant, air dose rates have decreased by approximately 71% compared to November 2011.

Although we have lifted evacuation orders as radiation doses have dropped and the living environment and infrastructure have improved, we aim to lift evacuation orders in most areas by next spring, with the exception of “difficult to return zones” with particularly high dose rates.

In the remaining “difficult to return zones”, we plan to develop habitable “specified reconstruction and recovery zones” in the

future.

We intend to advance decontamination and necessary infrastructure development even in places that are off limits at this time in order to realize the hope of the people who would like to return to their homes.

In addition to the steady promotion of work to decommission reactors at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant, we are promoting the establishment of research and development bases for innovative technologies along the coastal areas through the “Fukushima Innovation Coast Initiative”. We expect new industries that were not in existence before the earthquake to be developed. For example, the Naraha Remote Technology Development Center has already started full-scale operations in Naraha Town. The Collaborative Laboratories for Advanced Decommissioning Science (CLADS) International Joint Research Building in Tomioka Town is scheduled to be completed next month, and a robot development and demonstration bases will be developed in Namie Town and Minamisoma City. Demonstration projects for a floating offshore wind farm are also being carried out for research on renewable energies.

4. Food Safety

From this point on, I would like to make a request to people of overseas.

As a result of the impacts from the accident at the Nuclear Power Plant, import restrictions were imposed on Japanese agricultural,

forestry, and fishery products. Since then, 21 countries have lifted these restrictions and many countries and regions have significantly relaxed the restrictions.

Japan carries out an inspection of radioactive substances according to the world's strictest level of standard limits based on scientific evidences. Only foods that have passed the inspection are circulated in the market. Of course, exported foods are subject to the same strict inspection process.

The Japanese Standard specify that general foods containing radioactive substances of 100 Bq or higher per 1 kg should not be circulated on the market. This standard is extremely strict compared with standards in the EU, the United States, and CODEX, which is used as an international standard, and can be considered to be the strictest in the world. We use more stringent standards for drinking water, milk, and infant foods.

Last year, no rice, vegetables and fruits, livestock products, cultivated mushrooms, or seafood products grown in Fukushima Prefecture were detected to have exceeded standard limits. Inspections on rice grown in Fukushima Prefecture are conducted for all bags of rice, not only samples. In both 2015 and 2016, there were no bags of rice that exceeded the standard limit. We are also inspecting seafood products in the waters of Fukushima Prefecture. Since April 2015, we have found no items that exceed

the standard limits.

Japan's food inspections have been evaluated as appropriate by international organizations, such as IAEA and FAO.

Although we have heard people express worries over water, since late 2011, the standard value of radioactive cesium in seawater around the Nuclear Power Plant has continued to be significantly lower than 10 Bq per liter. This is in line with WHO Guidelines for Drinking-water Quality. The IAEA has also assessed that public safety is being ensured.

I am sure you can understand that it is irrational to restrict the import of Japanese food products that are sold on the market, which have passed very strict inspection. We would like the authorities in each country and region to see these scientific and objective facts.

Fukushima Prefecture is a place traditionally producing delicious food, particularly superior products, such as rice and peaches.

Young people are also working on regenerating Fukushima's agriculture.

In September last year, a food fan club called "Team Fukushima Pride" was established with the support of the Reconstruction Agency. Consumers who become members of "Team Fukushima Pride" can purchase products from Fukushima, such as fruit, rice, sake, and processed goods, from the website. They can also take

part in agricultural tours, and interact with local farmers through Facebook.

Many young farmers in “Team Fukushima Pride” are making various new attempts.

For example, Mr. Yoshitaka Ono, who runs Ono Farm which produces large fruit with high sugar content and apple juice that was selected as a gift for last year’s G7 Ise-Shima Summit, is carrying out activities that combine fruit and tourism, such as a farm beer garden, besides agricultural production, and is making the image of agriculture more familiar to younger generations to help raise the next generation of farmers. In addition, Mr. Junichi Hasegawa, who established the initiative of “Aizu Traditional Vegetables Connecting People and Seeds” after the earthquake, grows Aizu traditional vegetables without agricultural chemicals from local and specific species that have been passed down over 400 years.

I would like foreigners to enjoy these types of new agriculture in Fukushima.

5. Promoting Tourism in Tohoku

Lastly, I would like more foreigners to come to Japan and visit Tohoku.

Tohoku offers a variety of surprises and discoveries for visitors throughout the seasons. For people who like nature, those who

like history, and those who are fans of gourmet foods, Tohoku is a region that is full of charm.

Matsushima off the coast of Miyagi Prefecture consists of 260 islands. It is one of three most scenic spots in Japan. The beauty of the morning sun rising from behind the islands and the sea at night with the moon shining on it will become your lifetime memory. You can also take a boat between the 100-meter cliffs in Geibikei Gorge in Iwate Prefecture and can see soft rime in Zao on the border between Miyagi and Yamagata prefectures. Of course, visitors can enjoy the area's natural treasures throughout the year, with beautiful cherry blossoms, fresh green and autumn leaves, as well as hot springs. The poet Matsuo Basho of the Edo period also travelled to Tohoku and composed many excellent haiku poems. These precious natural landscapes have been formed over a long period of time as a result of the planet's activities that sometimes pose a major threat.

The Sanriku region, which straddles the prefectures of Aomori, Iwate, and Miyagi, and Mt. Bandai in Fukushima Prefecture have been certified by the Japan Geoparks Network as scientifically valuable topography and geology. In these geoparks, we can learn about the history of global tectonics and the connection between nature and regional culture, and can fully enjoy the beautiful surroundings.

The Tohoku region is also filled with historical heritage sites.

In Goshono Jomon Park in the northern area of Iwate Prefecture, visitors can see the settlements of the Jomon people from 4,000 to 4,500 years ago. If you are interested in more recent history, you can experience the Buddhist view of life and death of the aristocracy that flourished from the 11th to the 12th century in Hiraizumi in Iwate Prefecture, which is a World Heritage site. If you are interested in the Edo period, I think it is exciting to visit the ruins of the civil war of the late 19th century that led to the Meiji Restoration in Aizu Wakamatsu and walk around the streetscape from 300 years ago at the Ouchi-juku in Fukushima Prefecture. There are also traditional villages and community forests spread out all over the Tohoku region, where you can experience the original landscape of Japan.

You can also find delicious seafood along the coastal areas of Tohoku, and a rich supply of vegetables, fruits, and wild vegetables, which give a unique taste to local dishes. The area is famous for sake and has won numerous awards at competitions.

I would like more people from overseas to visit Tohoku with so much charm and appeal. This would further boost the reconstruction there. The people of Tohoku are looking forward to welcome people from all over the world and to thank them for their support. When you visit, you will be welcomed warmly whether you can speak Japanese or not. Information and services for visitors from overseas have been enhanced to ensure that people will be able to travel to the region with an easy mind.

The Rugby World Cup will be held in Japan in 2019. Kamaishi City in Iwate Prefecture is also one of the venues. The Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games will also be held in 2020. Japan has named the 2020 Games as the “Reconstruction Olympic and Paralympic Games.” It is a great opportunity to communicate the state of Tohoku that is achieving a recovery and to also boost reconstruction efforts.

The athletes, press corps, leading figure, and tourists that visit Japan to participate in and watch the Olympic and Paralympic Games can use this chance to visit Tohoku and see the newly reconstructed area, which is referred to as “Build Back Better” meaning it is even more robust, rich, and attractive than before the disaster.

Mr. Kohei Uchimura, a well-known Olympic gold medalist in gymnastics, is also offering his support to disaster-affected areas through participation in events and public relations activities as an “ambassador for reconstruction.”

If, through your coverage, people around the world feel that they would like to experience the food and charm of Tohoku, I believe that the purpose of this talk today will have been fulfilled.

Thank you for your kind attention today.