

**Foreign Press Club Japan Press Briefing
by Minister for Reconstruction Tsuyoshi Takagi
“Recovery from the Great East Japan Earthquake,
Five Years Later”**

(February 23, 2016)

1. Introduction

I am Tsuyoshi Takagi, Minister for Reconstruction.

I would first of all like to offer my heartfelt condolences to those who lost their lives in the earthquake that struck Taiwan on the 6th of February, and also to offer my sincerest sympathies to those suffered from the earthquake.

Four and half months have passed since I took up this post. During this period, based on my motto of a hands-on policy, I have visited the area affected by the Great East Japan Earthquake more than 20 times, and had face-to-face meetings with the local mayors and citizens.

It will be 5 years since the disaster struck.

Today, I would like to share with you all the current situation of reconstruction from the disaster and would like you to observe how much things have changed for the better compared to 5 years ago.

2. Occurrence of an unprecedented earthquake

On March 11, 2011, the Great East Japan Earthquake struck.

This was a compound disaster involving the three elements of a massive earthquake, a once-in-a-thousand years tsunami and a nuclear power plant accident.

People in other countries must have seen over and over again the footage of Japan at that time.

We are extremely grateful to have received support in all sorts of ways from more than 160 countries and regions, and from over 40

international organisations.

While it is not possible to list each name of the country, they all helped Japan to feel that it was not alone in coping with the disaster.

Also, last year, Prince William the Duke of Cambridge from the UK visited the afflicted area, stayed in a Japanese inn, ate food from Fukushima and met Prime Minister Abe, as well as having a relationship with local children.

Soon, 5 years will have passed since the disaster struck. The reconstruction phase is set for ten years, and we are now approaching the halfway point.

Today I have three messages to share with you.

The first is that reconstruction from the disaster is proceeding steadily.

The second is that Japanese foods are safe.

The third is that I would like many foreign tourists to visit Tohoku, to taste the food of Tohoku, and to experience Tohoku.

3. Reconstruction is proceeding steadily

For the last 5 years, Japan has devoted a huge amount of resources toward the reconstruction.

As well as spending the national treasury, including tax hikes, everyone in the afflicted areas and local government organizations have been making every endeavor toward the reconstruction, in the spirit of "self-help, mutual help, and public help". Employees from local governments, private companies and organizations across Japan have been dispatched in order to support the afflicted areas.

With the collective efforts of the nation, we are engaged in initiatives for reconstruction proceeding steadily.

And, as I expressed at the beginning of this speech, we has been given a lot of support from all corners of the world.

Thanks to these factors, reconstruction is proceeding steadily.

At the peak, the number of people who had to leave their homes amounted to 470,000; however, this has now fallen by half to less than 180,000 .

Apart from the regions afflicted by the nuclear power incident in Fukushima Prefecture, infrastructure for the most part has been

recovered.

We have secured places of residence for people, and in 3 years we expect to have everyone rehoused. In doing so, we make every effort to maintain communities by transferring entire settlements.

In the Taro district of Miyako City, Iwate Prefecture, the business area is formally open for business again, and in Minamisanriku Town, Miyagi Prefecture, the central hospital inundated by the tsunami was restored inland.

Reconstruction in Iwate and Miyagi Prefectures is entering a new stage.

It is true that the state of progress for reconstruction differs from place to place. And, as reconstruction proceeds, new challenges appear.

At the end of last year, as measures for new challenges, I announced that we work to provide long-term evacuees with mental care, form communities and revitalize industry and people's way of life.

The Tohoku region in particular is famous for processed seafood, with the Sanriku area being one of the 3 greatest fishing grounds in the world; yet it suffered calamitous damage due to the tsunami.

However, recovery and reconstruction is gradually proceeding.

Stretching 880 meters, the world's largest fish market was established in Miyagi Prefecture. We aim for full-scale recovery of the fisheries industry, by shipping high added-value seafood, in line with "HACCP" which is the global foods hygiene control system.

The tourism industry is also off to a late start. I will address this point later on.

Five years since the disaster, in the afflicted area there are all sorts of new ventures under way by various actors in various fields including "industry/livelihood" and "community", which are free from the traditional approaches and concepts. I hope that this model will take off around the nation and be adopted as a model for resolving various local issues.

4. Fukushima also progressing, aside from the coastal areas

Except for the eastern coastal areas on the Pacific side, which were afflicted by the nuclear power plant incident, reconstruction is well under way in Fukushima Prefecture.

Reconstruction along coastal areas has regrettably only just begun and will unavoidably require much more time.

However, such areas only account for 7% of the surface area of Fukushima Prefecture. Furthermore, the number of people in Fukushima Prefecture who left their original homes is 100,000, amounting to 5% of the 2 million population.

In most places in Fukushima, people are living safely in peace of mind.

What is more, the situation at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant is under control, with robots being deployed to aid the extremely tricky process of decommissioning.

In Fukushima, the Innovation Coast concept, which aims to create new industry by developing the research fields for cutting-edge technology for decommissioning and robot technology, is gathering speed. In the future, Fukushima will become an area for international industry including decommissioning and robot technology. Fukushima Prefecture is involved in generating renewable energy through biomass using Fukushima-cultivated timber, for which there are high hopes.

I visited the Fukushima Daiichi Plant in December of last year.

I also visited immediately after the incident 5 years ago, and at that time, it was still necessary to wear protective suits covering the whole body even in the bus from J-Village, where was the base of Tokyo Electric Power Co., to the power plant 20km away. However, when I visited last year, we were able to wear normal clothing in J-Village and in the bus, as well as in the headquarters of the power plant; we only had to wear Tyvek suits once we got close to the nuclear reactors.

The task of removing debris is also progressing steadily.

While some amongst you may clearly remember the hydrogen explosions of the Daiichi Plant's building 5 years ago, the situation has markedly improved. I could see that countermeasures against

polluted water are also clearly progressing.

Furthermore, the central government and local governments are continuing decontamination efforts and combined with natural decay, the air radiation dose is definitely decreasing. In comparison to November 2011, it has decreased by approximately 65%.

The air radiation dose ratio within Fukushima Prefecture, as of November last year, is 0.19 microsieverts per hour in Fukushima City, where the prefectural office is located, and in Iwaki City which has the highest population, is 0.07 microsieverts, and 0.11 microsieverts in Koriyama City, the 2nd biggest city. This is almost the same level as most major cities around the world.

Evacuation orders that were issued following the nuclear incident have gradually been lifted in line with the decreased dosage, with orders lifted the year before last in parts of Tamura City and Kawauchi Village, and also in September of last year for Naraha Town where J Village is located.

The dosage in Naraha Town is extremely low, at 0.11 microsieverts.

In Naraha Town, salmon fishing has re-started. Rice planting is being prepared for the resumption of agriculture; the other day I partook of some rice provided by the town mayor, which was extremely tasty.

In the Kawamata Town where overnights stay is permitted to prepare for the lifting of evacuation orders, it is customary to pour water into the rice paddies in the winter following the harvest, which freezes to create an ice-skating rink for the local children, and this was also re-opened last month.

In this way, reconstruction in Fukushima is proceeding steadily.

The Japanese are a people who place importance on their hometowns. From here onward, I will redouble efforts to ensure that people who left their hometowns can return and live in peace of mind.

Except for difficult-to-return zones, evacuation orders will be lifted by March 2017, and we will endeavour to create an environment whereby those who wish to return home are able to do so.

We will never abandon these areas.

We are making headway towards the reconstruction, actually the rebirth of Fukushima.

5. Japanese Foods are safe to eat

So, as Japan pushes forward with reconstruction, there is something I would like to ask your help with improving.

Since the nuclear power plant incident, about 80 countries and regions have cited concerns over contamination by radioactive materials, restricted and suspended the imports of Japanese food products. Since then, while these restrictions have been partially eased or lifted, some restrictions still remain.

Japan is inspecting radioactive materials based on the most stringent baseline levels in the world, based on scientific evidence.

With great expense, every single grain and bag of rice grown in Fukushima Prefecture is subject to strict examination.

Only safe produce that has passed these stringent examinations is allowed onto the market. Indeed, only foods that have passed our strict examinations will be shipped overseas.

So that people in Japan and abroad can enjoy food in peace of mind, we will continue to provide accurate information regarding examination results.

Amid this, there has been good news recently.

In January this year, based on past data, the EU significantly lifted import restrictions on food products from Japan.

I hope to see remaining restrictions lifted in other countries and regions based upon scientific evidence.

6. Visit Tohoku

I would like to finish today by asking you all to come and visit Tohoku.

In order to increase the inflow of foreign tourists, the Japanese government is promoting its Visit Japan campaign, thanks to which the number of foreigners visiting Japan yearly is likely to reach 20 million. However, regrettably, Tohoku has not caught this momentum.

Since becoming Minister for Reconstruction, I myself have visited Tohoku on many occasions and re-discovered the delicious food and abundant tourist attractions.

Brands of Japanese sake produced in Fukushima take the most gold medals at domestic tasting competitions. Prime Minister Abe also enjoyed "Aizu Homare," which took the highest prize at an international wine tasting competition, to his heart's content.

Tohoku also boasts many ski slopes and hot springs, as well as world cultural heritage sites such as Hiraizumi which are steeped in Japanese culture, and are a must-see for any tourist. Tohoku is home to many archaeological excavation sites from the Jomon Era, which are said to be the very origins of Japan.

Tourists can discover good old Japanese countryside, and the rustic side of Japan.

I would like many foreign tourists to visit and enjoy Tohoku.

So, I decided to call this year the First Year of Tohoku Tourism Recovery, and set up an advisory committee to this end. This is the initiative to fight against the accelerated depopulation after the disaster, by increasing the number of people to interact with.

This year, Japan will host the G7 Summit (The Ise-Shima Summit), and many Ministerial meetings will take place across the nation. The Finance Minister's Meeting will take place in Sendai City, Miyagi Prefecture.

Governments and media-related people will visit Japan in droves. I would like many foreign visitors to visit Tohoku and understand what a wonderful place it is.

This will help to provide a tailwind for reconstruction, and will also give the people of Tohoku a chance to show their appreciation to foreign countries for the support they provided in the last few years.

In order for this to happen, I hope that the direct flights between some overseas airports and Fukushima airport, which were suspended following the disaster, can resume.

Japan will host the Rugby World Cup in 2019, and matches will be played in Kamaishi City, which sustained damage from the

tsunami. The government will support Kamaishi City.

What's more, the Tokyo Olympics and Paralympics will be held in 2020. I would like the Olympic torch relay to go through the disaster area, as well as camps and qualifying rounds.

I am getting very excited about the Olympics already. I will redouble efforts for reconstruction so that when foreign visitors come to Japan for these tournaments, they will think, "Tohoku has recovered" and "Japan is stronger than before the disaster."

Without the reconstruction of Tohoku, Japan cannot revive. We will create a new Tohoku that can serve as a blueprint for revitalization of other regions in the country.

I very much hope that people all over the world will support the reconstruction of Japan.

Thank you for your attention today.

End.