

Speech by Ambassador Keiichi Hayashi
Ceremony of Remembrance
to mark one year after the Great East Japan Earthquake

11 March 2012

Excellencies, My Lords, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you very much for being here today, exactly one year after the Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami, which struck Tohoku at 2:46 pm on 11th March, 2011. It was an unprecedented disaster which simply humbled us. Despite the most advanced technology we had and all the preparations we had made on the basis of past experiences of major natural disasters, it went way beyond our imagination. It took the lives of 16,000 people, while more than 3,000 are still missing despite the extensive search which is still ongoing.

It wreaked horrific destruction over a vast area, causing casualties in 20 out of 47 prefectures. The tsunami washed away a total area covering 500 square km. The economic damage alone reached an estimated amount of 16 trillion yen or 130 billion pounds – four times as big as the total defence budget of the United Kingdom.

The total amount of debris left by the giant tsunami reached 23 million tons or nearly 400kg each for every single person of the entire population of the UK to carry away. The whole situation was compounded by the nuclear crisis in Fukushima, although fortunately the plant has now reached the relatively stable stage of “cold shut-down”, and no-one has been killed by the radiation.

The tragedy was beyond description, but it was not without a silver lining. The international response to it was most heart-warming. There was an outpouring of expressions of concern and sympathy as well as generous material assistance from around the world. In the past five decades or so, Japan had become used to its role as a major aid donor. For once, last year Japan became a major aid recipient and humbly appreciated the warmth and importance of international assistance.

Such help came not least from our friends in the United Kingdom. Fund-raising activities of various kinds were initiated immediately, and the British Government wasted no time in dispatching a search-and-rescue mission, while the Government also being very supportive in material ways.

In the months that followed, on top of generous donations from so many people, there were a number of charity events in support of the victims of the disaster, including concerts, auctions and bazaars. In June nearly two thousand people attended an unprecedented memorial service held in the magnificent surroundings of Westminster Abbey. In the same month, nearly five hundred people came to a modest charity bazaar that took place at my Official Residence, and there were many similar initiatives throughout the summer. In November, thanks to the generosity of the Football Association and sponsors, a special team of high-school students from the Tohoku region was invited to play football on the hallowed pitch of Wembley Stadium in the presence of such special guests as Sports and Culture Secretary of State Jeremy Hunt and Sir Bobby Charlton.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank personally all those who made their respective contributions for the cause of aiding Tohoku. I have invited some – unfortunately not all, due to the limited capacity – of these people of goodwill, and I want to say to you – and, through you, to everyone involved, “Thank you very much, from the bottom of my heart.”

The enormity of the damage is such that the reconstruction process will take time – a long, long time indeed. But I can say now with confidence that it is firmly on track. The Japanese Government has drawn up a ten-year programme for reconstruction with a projected budget of 190 billion pounds. And the budget will come from Government bonds, which will be fully financed with the help of an interim tax rise over the coming years.

The physical reconstruction work is steadily moving forward, as I myself witnessed in January when I visited Fukushima Prefecture, together with some of my colleagues, after we had attended an annual heads of mission conference held in Tokyo. We had a chance to speak with the Governor of the Prefecture, the Mayor of Soma City and many others directly involved in crisis management in the immediate aftermath of the disaster and now engaged in the formidable challenge of reconstruction work, including decontamination.

They all expressed their gratitude for the robust support that had been given by people around the world, while making it clear that continued assistance was urgently needed. Amid the lingering scenes of devastation, we were heartened by the determination that the local people were showing in their attempts to overcome an extremely difficult situation.

At the end of our meeting with the Governor of Fukushima, he presented us with some beautiful, large strawberries produced in his prefecture. He wanted us to convey to the world that, despite the misconception some people might still have that such products were unsafe, this was not the case. They were definitely free from radiation and utterly delicious!

On this subject of food safety, later at this reception you will be able to savour sushi made with rice from Fukushima as well as sake and other food and drinks representing Tohoku, all of which are not only completely safe but also very tasty. We had wanted to offer more delicacies directly from the region but cannot do so as we are not allowed to import much in the way of food and drinks from Japan due to the European Union’s blanket restrictions imposed following the disaster.

They are not helpful for the recovery of the local economy in the devastated regions. For fairness, I must add that EU are not the only countries that have taken such measures. However, the relevant measures taken by the United States are basically in line with Japan’s domestic shipment restrictions, and consequently are much more limited in scope and extent. Many other countries, such as Canada and Chile, have long since lifted their restrictions completely. We keenly await similarly positive moves from EU countries. It would be helpful for the recovery of the local economy the devastated regions. It is worth mentioning here that Japan’s system for testing

foodstuffs on radiation levels has always been stringent and will be strengthened still further from April.

The production and distribution of foodstuffs is but one aspect of Japan's economy that is steadily returning to normal. In fact, in most parts of Japan other than the limited area of designated evacuation zones around the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant, life can now go on as before. The action of a number of countries in dropping their warnings to their nationals against travelling to Japan testifies to the fact that JAPAN IS SAFE.

In this respect, I would like to thank the British Government for making calm and measured response to the situation as it maintained and even strengthened its Embassy in Tokyo and kept providing objective and scientific advice, which was attentively followed by many residents, British or otherwise, in Japan as well as the rest of the world.

Of course, what Japan really wants is for more people to go and see for themselves that the country remains an extremely safe and most attractive travel destination, offering international tourists a variety of cultural and culinary delights as well as a wide range of outdoor activities, without fear of violent crimes.

Thankfully, there are signs of an upturn in the number of foreign visitors. Indeed, the number of British tourists to Japan this January was almost the same level as one year previously. Here again the composed, practical approach of the British people shines through.

Japan is now tackling the task of reconstruction with the utmost vigour. Naturally, it is vital that our economy keeps growing so that we can finance the enormous expenditure required primarily by ourselves. For this reason, Japan needs to ensure the healthy growth of its international trade and investment. In this respect, the UK has been and will remain one of Japan's most significant partners.

In order to further boost both the Japanese and British economies, the conclusion of a Japan-EU Economic Partnership Agreement is of paramount importance. Thanks to the strong support of the UK, emphatically and repeatedly voiced by Prime Minister Cameron himself, we are now hopeful of seeing the launch of negotiations for such an agreement as early as this summer. The conclusion of a Japan-EU EPA will encourage further Japanese inward investment into the UK, and vice versa.

In fact, Japan has always been keen to attract more investment from overseas, but we now have an even greater need for fresh capital, domestic or foreign, to help bring about a much needed economic recovery. Foreign direct investment will bring with it new ideas and new approaches to tackling challenges in business and society at large.

One year on, we can look at many positive aspects of Japan's response, such as the rapid rebuilding of roads, railways and other elements of infrastructure. In the next room we are displaying information on how swiftly the recovery has been achieved.

One notable example is the restoration of the supply chain of key parts and components for the car industry. In the beginning the damage to the factories was so significant that it was feared that the disruption to the supply chain would linger on

throughout the year and cause the stoppage of production lines in many parts of the world. But in reality it had been fully restored already by the summer and car production in Japan, the US and Europe, including the UK, has quickly returned to a normal level.

Admittedly there are areas where we could or should have done better. However, we in Japan have learned valuable lessons from both success and failure in our own crisis management, all of which we are willing to share with our friends overseas, should they – God forbid! – be faced with similar challenges in the future.

We have taken and will continue to take the initiative as regards international cooperation on disaster prevention. One example would be the ministerial level international conference on large-scale natural disasters which the Japanese Government is hosting in July in the City of Sendai in Tohoku.

Sir Winston Churchill once mesmerised the boys of the famous Harrow School when he addressed them thus: “Never give in, never give in, never, never, never, never – in nothing, great or small, large or petty – never give in except to convictions of honour and good sense.”

A year ago, Japan was faced with a situation beyond its citizens’ worst nightmares. Much was made in the international media of the stoicism and determination of the people in tackling the disaster and trying to rebuild their lives. On the first anniversary of that unimaginable disaster, I think we can say that the Japanese people have taken to heart the Churchillian advice.

Buoyed by the support of our friends in the UK and elsewhere around the world, we in Japan will indeed “never give in” but will keep fighting on for a successful rebirth of the communities and the nation.

Thank you.