

Address by Ambassador Kenji Hiramatsu
at Inauguration of Japan-India Act East Forum
5 December, 2017

[Introduction]

It is my great pleasure to welcome and express my heartfelt gratitude to all of you for gathering here today to witness the commemorative inauguration of the Japan-India Act East Forum. Indeed, I am sure that the Act East Forum will be a milestone for an enhanced relationship between Japan and North Eastern Region in India.

[Significance of Japan's cooperation in North Eastern Region]

The North Eastern Region is the place where Japan's "Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy" and India's "Act East Policy" converge. Further, the area is located at a strategically and economically critical juncture between India and Southeast Asia as well as within BIMSTEC countries.

Historically, Japan was related to the North Eastern Region through the experience of the Battles of Imphal and Kohima during World War 2. I have visited Manipur twice and Nagaland once to pay tribute to the war victims. As I exchanged words with the local people, I was impressed and touched by the warm and friendly feelings that the people of Manipur and Nagaland extended to Japan, in spite of the tragic experience of the war.

I felt that the people of the region strongly wish that Japan enhance its cooperation, not only economically but also culturally, based on our historical connection and ethnic similarity. Japan is determined to respond to this wish and support economic and social development in this region.

During the visit of Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to India in September, the Government of Japan and Government of India concluded a Memorandum of Cooperation to establish this forum. The mission of this forum is to boost the cooperation on the development in and to foster people-to-people exchanges with North Eastern Region.

Moreover, in their Joint Statement, the two leaders underlined the importance of all countries ensuring the development and use of connectivity infrastructure in an open, transparent and non-exclusive manner based on international standards and responsible debt financing practices, while ensuring respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, the rule of law and the environment.

They also reaffirmed the importance of “quality infrastructure” which, among others ensures alignment with local economic and development strategies, safety, resilience, social and environmental impacts, and job creation as well as capacity building for the local communities.

[Existing cooperation schemes and prospect in North Eastern Region]

To materialize the initiative into reality, both governments exchanged the note concerning the loan project of the North East Road Network Connectivity Improvement Project. This loan covers the improvement of National Highway 40 in Meghalaya and construction of a bypass on National Highway 54 in Mizoram. The project has a series of components and we are keen to extend the cooperation to other areas in the region.

Japan is currently focusing not only on physical infrastructure projects such as road connectivity, electricity, water supply and sewage, but also on cultural and people-to-people exchanges as well as social and environmental sustainability schemes. In this context, Japan is actively encouraging people-to-people exchanges and cultural cooperation.

To name a few, the Japanese Government initiated what we call “IRIS Program” and invited young people from Manipur and Nagaland, 23 of them this year, to Japan; IIT-Guwahati has opened a Japanese language course with the support of a university in Japan; and Manipur Tourism Forum has started the construction of a War Museum in Imphal with financial support from a Japanese organization, Nippon Foundation. In addition, we are considering cooperation with the National Sports University, Manipur as the North Eastern Region is a treasure trove of sports talent.

Furthermore, Japan is keen to expand business opportunities of Japanese companies in North Eastern Region so that we can directly share the economic profits with the local societies.

[Conclusion]

To turn the potential of the North Eastern Region into reality, I hope that this Act East Forum will play a major role and I would request the state governments in the North Eastern Region to clarify the necessity, priority and significance of Japan's cooperation when you propose cooperation projects so that both of us can smoothly process and implement them. The Forum is comprised of all the relevant Union Ministries and state governments of North Eastern Region from India's side, and the Embassy of Japan and all government-affiliated agencies in New Delhi from Japan's side. This is the first such framework to get all the relevant officials together. As we will exchange various cooperative activities, I hope we will be able to find some commonalities of the challenges each state faces and the solutions to those challenges, as well as sharing the common objectives for the development in the North Eastern Region as a whole. These common objectives will even lead to the enhanced connectivity with neighboring countries such as Myanmar, Thailand, Bangladesh and Bhutan. The Forum will work as a critical platform to expand cooperation between Japan and India in the North Eastern Region.

To conclude, I am sure that this initiative will further expand our cooperation in the North Eastern Region, deepen friendship between Japan and this region, and reinforce Japan-India relationship further.

Thank you for your attention.