

Address by Ambassador Hiramatsu at Opening Ceremony of
India International Cherry Blossom Festival 2018
on 14 November 2018 in Polo Ground, Shillong, Meghalaya

Honorable Chief Minister of Meghalaya, Mr. Conrad Sangma
Hon'ble Ministers of the State Government of Meghalaya
Distinguished guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

[Introduction]

It is my great pleasure to be here in Shillong at the advent of the cherry blossom season. I heartily congratulate you all for holding this third International Cherry Blossom Festival.

Cherry blossom, or Sakura, is very dear to the people of Japan. It has now taken on a further special meaning, thanks to this festival, to symbolize the friendship between Japan and North East. We share the similar tradition of appreciating the bloom of the adorable flowers.

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to those who rendered their valuable support to this festival. They include:

Forest and Environment Department of Government of Meghalaya;

Institute of Bioresources and Sustainable development (IBSD);

Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR);

Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI);

Asian Confluence;

North Eastern Council (NEC); and

The Japan Foundation, New Delhi.

I would like to thank you all.

Shillong is the cultural heart of the North East. So will be this year's festival. I hope you will enjoy Japanese food, judo performance, Japanese movies, Japanese drum session, seminars for studying in Japan, and a presentation on how Japanese people appreciate cherry blossom.

In addition, after this opening ceremony, "Dialogue with States" will be held in State Convention Center. I hope we can satisfy your interests in Japan through the programs we support.

[Indo-Japan relation]

At the end of last month, Prime Minister Modi visited Japan and had a fruitful discussion with Prime Minister Abe. I would say the visit was best ever, reflecting our "Special Strategic and Global Partnership." The meetings were filled with substance and the trust between our two leaders was incomparable, as they have met 12 times already. Indeed, Japan has institutionalized an annual mutual visit at leader's level only with India.

The Japan-India relations are special and as strong as ever, because they are anchored on the shared vision. At the nucleus lie our efforts toward a free and

open Indo-Pacific. At the summit meeting, Japan and India welcomed collaborative projects in countries such as Bangladesh and Myanmar but also in this region, India's North East.

The North East is where our shared vision crystalizes. The North East as a priority is evidenced by the "Japan-India Act East Forum." This is a unique forum in which we test various ideas for the further development of the North East and put them into action.

[Cooperation between Japan, North East and Meghalaya]

I will speak in more concrete terms at the Dialogue with States about the types of cooperation Japan is engaged in the North East. But I would like to give a brief overview here.

For instance, we take it seriously to enhance connectivity through improvement or construction of roads and bridges. We are aiming to support the development of this region by connecting not only the intra-regional links within the North East, but also the links between the North East and neighboring countries such as Bangladesh and Myanmar. To make the North East a gateway to the ASEAN will boost North East economy,

To get back to a topic which is more relevant to Cherry Blossom Festival, we are promoting people-to-people and cultural exchanges between Japan and the North East. My presence attests to our commitment to actually meet and talk to people

in this region. Japan launched a program to invite the promising youths of the North East to Japan, providing them with a real experience of Japan.

This program is called “IRIS program”. The name of the scheme derives from the mysterious botanical link between Japan and the North East. Despite being geographically apart, Japan and the North East share a similar species of iris flowers. The locally called “kombirei” iris species is interestingly identical with “kakitsubata” which is known as “Japanese iris”. Inspired by this coincidence, we named the scheme “IRIS program” so that it would connect Japan and the North East as the iris did.

Japan and this region have historical ties dating back to World War II. We wish to strengthen our friendship and let it bloom like cherry blossom and iris.

[Conclusion]

The Cherry Blossom Festival provides a wonderful opportunity for even stronger bonds. Once again, I would like you to enjoy the experience of Japanese culture. To conclude, I would like to thank once again for this festival, which gives me a chance to meet all of you, the people in Shillong and North East India. I wish you a most enjoyable festival.

End