Namo, Namo Lanka, Abe comes with deep gratitude

By Namini Wijedasa

Japan hopes that Sri Lanka's efforts at national reconciliation, such as expanding the mandate of the Presidential Commission of Inquiry on Missing Persons, will dispel concerns raised by resolutions at the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC). Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe said in an exclusive interview with the Sunday Times.

Mr. Abe, who arrives today, said he was visiting Sri Lanka with feelings of gratitude to Japan for encouraging Japan's return to the international community after World War II. The interview was conducted via email.

The Prime Minister avoided a direct question about the UNHRC's ongoing investigation into allegations of war crimes and human rights abuses in Sri Lanka.

"I understand that the Government of Sri Lanka is making constructive efforts for the development of national reconciliation, such as expanding the mandate of the Presidential Commission of Inquiry on Missing Persons," he replied. "Japan hopes such efforts made by Sri Lanka will lead to dispel concerns indicated in the resolution by the UN Human Rights Council."

Mr. Abe said Japan would continue to provide assistance to Sri Lanka, including in the area of building the confidence of the international community in the country.

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"For a long time, Japan has consistently strived for the development of peace in Sri Lanka and actively involved in and contributed to the peace process, with Yasushi Akashi, Representative of the Government of Japan, playing a major role," he said.

"Japan has also supported peace building in Sri Lanka after the end of the civil conflict and maintained its involvement in order to ensure the progress of national reconciliation. "With the end of the 20-year long civil conflict, I sincerely hope that in Sri Lanka, which showed Japan the spirit of tolerance 63 years ago, the peace talks will once again demonstrate such spirit and realise a true national reconciliation," he asserted.

Mr. Abe and First Lady Akie Abe will arrive at 12.45 p.m. today and leave at 3 a.m. tomorrow. Shortly after his arrival, the Prime Minister will unveil a plaque for the 2nd phase of the Japanese-funded development of Bandaranaike International Airport. He will hold a bilateral meeting with President Mahinda Rajapaksa and visit Parliament.

The Prime Minister, who will be accompanied by a large business delegation, will also attend the Japan-Sri Lanka Business Forum meeting that precedes a banquet hosted for him by the President.

The First Lady will have her own schedule that includes a visit to the Carlton Preschool. They will both visit Kelaniya Raja Maha Vihara tomorrow before leaving. The first Japanese Prime Minister to visit Sri Lanka in 1957 was Mr. Abe's grandfather Nobusuke Kishi. "Having heard that the tree my grandfather planted is still being carefully looked after in Peradeniya Botanical Garden in the ancient city of Kandy, I have since been dreaming of visiting Sri Lanka," he reminisced.

Mr. Abe's visit takes place 63 years after Sri Lanka refused to demand war reparations from Japan in a moving speech made by J.R. Jayewardene, then Finance Minister in Prime Minister D.S. Senanayake's Cabinet. Mr. Jayewardene recited the words of the Buddha — "Hatred ceases not by hatred, but by love" — at the San Francisco Peace Conference on September 6, 1951.

The Japanese Prime Minister observed that, by saying this phrase, it was Sri Lanka which encouraged his country's return to the international community at a time when it was "trying to take a step forward to its reconstruction from its post-war devastation".

"Over 60 years since then, Japan as a peace-loving nation has contributed to world peace," he said. "This time, I would like to visit Sri Lanka with feelings of gratitude towards them."