

Address by Mr. Norio Mitsuya,
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the Forum for the Promotion of
Public-Private Cooperation in the Mekong Region
The Fourth Mekong-Japan Meeting
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Distinguished delegates from the governments and private sectors of the Mekong region countries,

Ladies and gentlemen,

First of all, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to all of you for taking the time out of you busy schedules to attend the Fourth Mekong-Japan Meeting of the Forum for the promotion of Public-Private Cooperation in the Mekong Region. I want to welcome Mr. Sommath Pholsena, Minister of Public Works and Transport of Lao PDR, distinguished representatives of the governments and private sectors of five Mekong region countries, and experts in various fields, who traveled to Japan to be here today.

The ties between Japan and ASEAN countries including the Mekong region countries became stronger than ever last year. A string of Japanese cabinet members including Prime Minister Abe himself visited ASEAN countries from the beginning of last year, as we celebrated the 40th Anniversary of ASEAN-Japan Friendship and Cooperation. In particular, Prime Minister Abe began the year by his visit to Thailand and Viet Nam in January, followed by the visit to Myanmar, which was the first visit by Japanese Prime Minister to that country in 36 years. By visiting Laos and Cambodia in November, he completed his tour of all the ASEAN countries within just one year. He also convened the ASEAN - Japan Commemorative Summit Meeting and the Mekong - Japan Summit Meeting in December. Just by looking at these facts, you will see how important this region is to the Abe administration. Furthermore, there is a lot of attention from Japanese companies to this region, and business organizations have been sending missions to this region constantly. I take every opportunity to meet with those business representatives and work to support this momentum in my capacity as government official.

1 Japan's Assistance for Development of the Mekong Region and Japan-Mekong cooperation

Japan and the Mekong region countries have fostered a close relationship in various fields, including in politics, economy and culture. Last year marked the 40th Anniversary of Establishment of Diplomatic Relations between Japan and Viet Nam and the 60th Anniversary of Establishment of Diplomatic Relations between Japan and Cambodia. I would like to express my deep appreciation for the support we had from private companies to various commemorative events. I sincerely look

forward to continuing our partnership, as we celebrate the 60th anniversary of Establishment of Diplomatic Relations between Japan and Myanmar this year, and the 60th anniversary of Establishment of Diplomatic Relations between Japan and Lao PDR next year.

Myanmar was the focus of a lot of attention last year. As the economic corridors in the Mekong region developed, investment from Japanese companies in Cambodia and Laos also increased. On the other hand, in recent months there has been more talk of the risk factors in the Mekong region countries, in the context of the current situation in Thailand and Cambodia as well as phase-down of Quantitative Easing (QE) in the United States. That said, Japan's support to the Mekong region countries is not to be influenced from such short-term perspective but is rather dictated by a long-term perspective for the development of individual countries and the region at large.

In this connection, I would like to take this opportunity to encourage once again all parties in Thailand to exercise restraint and refrain from violence, and to express a strongly hope that differences will be settled peacefully through democratic process and sincere dialogue. I would also like to reiterate Japan's expectation that all parties in Cambodia resolve the issues in a peaceful manner and refrain from violence. I strongly hope and expect that the dialogue between the ruling and opposition parties regarding the election results in July last year resume in a timely manner, toward an early normalization of the situation.

The target for the biggest challenge for ASEAN, namely the establishment of the ASEAN community, is the end of 2015. Japan-Mekong cooperation will contribute to this lofty goal. The remaining challenges of the ASEAN integration are enhancing connectivity and reducing development gaps in the ASEAN region. Japan will continue to provide assistance for enhancing connectivity, including infrastructure development in the Mekong region, which is the continental part of the ASEAN region. In addition, Japan will further strengthen assistance in the so-called "soft" infrastructure such as institution- and capacity- building for managing so-called "hard" infrastructure. Japan will also assist the economic development of this region in every way so that we can help close the development gaps in the region.

On Mekong-Japan cooperation, we adopted the "Tokyo Strategy 2012 for Mekong-Japan Cooperation" which contains the commitment of approximately 600 billion JPY in ODA over the next three years to the Mekong Region, in the Fourth Mekong Japan Summit held in April 2012. The leaders of Japan and the Mekong region countries conducted mid-term review of "Tokyo Strategy 2012" at the Fifth Mekong Japan Summit in December 2013, and Japan announced and signed a total of 200 billion JPY in support for the Mekong region at a series of meetings held during this period. Japan also resumed its full-fledged assistance to Myanmar in 2013.

2 Public-Private Cooperation in the Mekong Region

The Japanese government has made various efforts to improve business environment in this region. For instance, the bilateral investment agreement between Japan and Myanmar was signed in December last year. This is an investment agreement containing substantial elements of

liberalization for Myanmar for the first time, and we expect further improvement of the investment environment in Myanmar. In addition, the Government of Japan eased visa requirements for all Mekong countries last year; Japan decided to launch negotiations with Cambodia and Laos towards bilateral air services agreements. Through these efforts, we expect further promotion of people-to-people exchange and economic activities including tourism between Japan and the Mekong region countries.

Today, during the morning session of this Forum, representatives from Japan and the Mekong region countries will introduce policies and measures on Mekong-Japan cooperation in the morning. There is much attention towards industrial structures in the Mekong region in recent days, and in light of this, Mr. Keiichiro Oizumi, Senior Economist of the Economics Department of the Japan Research Institute will give us a lecture on strengthening competitiveness of Japanese firms through development of the Mekong region. Furthermore, at working group sessions in the afternoon, we will deepen discussions on specific themes, such as “Infrastructure and Special Economic Zones (SEZ)”, “Tourism” and “Health care cooperation”. These are priority areas of cooperation for the Abe administration as part of Japan’s growth strategy.

3 Conclusion

I am confident that the Mekong region will achieve greater development in the time ahead. We will be wise to grasp the needs of private sectors as early as possible and utilize the private sector’s strengths, in order to establish a win-win relationship between Japan and the Mekong region countries. It is my sincere hope that this Forum will create multi-layered and functional partnerships among the variety of participants from Japan and the Mekong region countries, and that it will provide opportunities for new activities that will contribute to the future development of the Mekong region.