

EXCLUSIVE

Japan PM Abe: ASEAN economy now the world's center of growth



ABE

By **ROY C. MABASA**

Japanese Prime Minister (PM) Shinzo Abe is in Manila to attend the 31st ASEAN Related Summits from November 12 to 14. The prime minister is accompanied by Norio Maruyama, press secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, who will serve as spokesperson in the duration of the visit. ▶ **8**

Japan PM Abe: ASEAN... ◀1

Prior to his visit, President Rodrigo Duterte met with Abe in Japan, where the Japanese leader reaffirmed Tokyo's commitment to the Philippines to provide economic cooperation from government and private-sector corporations in Japan to help Duterte's initiatives to revamp social infrastructure, including projects to build subways in Manila and improve rivers in Davao City, where Duterte served as mayor for more than two decades.

In a joint statement issued by the two leaders, Japan said it will strongly support the sustainable economic development of the Philippines by extending quality infrastructure assistance, using Japan's funding and technology. Japan's assistance will include programs that would ease traffic congestion in Manila and to vitalize other areas as well for economic development.

Abe also pledged to help the Philippines introduce better electric and liquefied natural gas facilities to improve the country's power supply systems and assist in the crackdown on the use of illegal drugs and strengthen maritime safety organization to monitor coastal areas.

With the ASEAN economy continuing to demonstrate outstanding growth, the Japanese prime minister emphasized the promising market potential in Southeast Asia as one of the world's leading production bases.

Before flying to Manila, the Japanese prime minister obliged to respond to an exclusive written interview with the Manila Bulletin on matters related to ASEAN and regional security issues. Here is the interview in full:

On ASEAN Integration
 MB: Since the AEC (ASEAN Economic Community) adoption, how did the ASEAN economies fare in market inte-

gration and what were the roadblocks? Is the regional block still high on Japan's radar screen? With major paradigm shift in global economy, is ASEAN still an attractive market?

ABE: I am looking forward to revisiting the Philippines, a strategic partner of Japan. When I visited Davao City for the first time as a foreign leader in January this year, I was deeply moved by the enthusiastic hospitality of the local people. In addition, I had a friendly talk with President Duterte at his private residence, which helped further strengthen our mutual trust. At the ASEAN-related summit meetings to be chaired by President Duterte, I intend to work on various issues concerning the region and the international community based on deep ties and strong cooperative relationship between our countries.

As it moves toward gradual integration, the ASEAN economy continues to demonstrate outstanding growth and is now the world's center of growth. It has young and vibrant people who are looking to the future with the spirit of openness and harmony. In the past 50 years, ASEAN GDP has increased by more than 100 times on a nominal basis from \$22.5 billion to \$2.6 trillion. The population has also increased from 180 million to 640 million. Indeed, ASEAN, growing at such a high rate, is a very promising market full of potential and is one of the world's leading production bases.

I believe that by promoting a free, fair, and rule-based economic zone throughout the Asia-Pacific, which is now the world's most dynamically expanding region, growth will be more reliable. Japan believes that it is important to promote free trade by achieving a high-quality Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) together with ASEAN. Nowadays, it's common

to see Japanese cars on the roads in ASEAN countries, and there are now many Japanese companies operating and building strong people-to-people connections through good employment practices within ASEAN. ASEAN-grown fruits are now common on dining tables in Japan. Truly, connections between Japan and ASEAN are strong, and both have fostered the fruits of growth.

In order to contribute to ASEAN's further growth in the next 50 years, Japan will continue to work on the development of 'Quality Infrastructure' and promotion of technical cooperation, including human resources development. 'Quality Infrastructure' is highly safe, creates jobs, enables technology transfer, takes into account social and environmental considerations, and abides by international standards.

Furthermore, as a leading promoter of free trade, Japan hopes to support robust and inclusive economic growth in the region by an early conclusion of a high-quality, ASEAN-led RCEP.

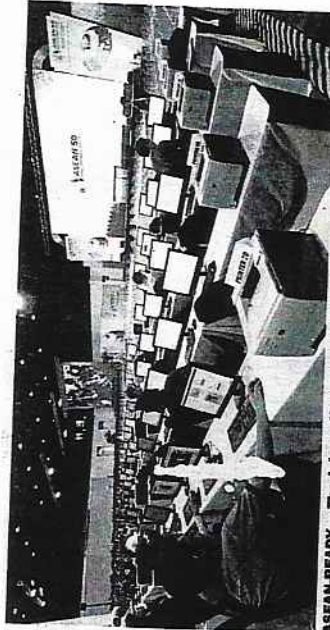
I am pleased to extend my congratulations to ASEAN on its 50th anniversary and successful economic integration. Japan is determined to continue growing closely with ASEAN as a good partner.

On Regional Security

MB: Of late, China has surpassed Japan in military spending by as much as four times, prompting some experts to say that there is now a 'one-sided arms race' in favor of Beijing. And China's continuous fortification in South China Sea poses another major challenge to Japan's security, and the entire region, in general.

Then comes North Korea whose missiles make Japan - a major US ally - a possible target.

How does Japan intend to address the increasing pressure of a worsening security environment in Asia-Pacific amid the perceived erosion of US influ-



ASEAN-READY - The International Media Center is up and running with computer units available for use to the accredited members of the media who will cover the 31st Association of Southeast Asian Nations Summit and Related Meetings in Pasay City. A total of 2,700 accredited members of media are expected to cover the summit. (Camille Anta)

ence in the region? Is Japan ready to take over its own defense given the urgency of the threats around her?

ABE: The security environment surrounding Japan, including North Korea's nuclear and missile issues, is getting more severe. Under these circumstances, it is vitally important to properly develop Japan's defense capabilities and to continually strengthen the deterrence and capabilities of the Japan-U.S. Alliance, the linchpin of Japan's diplomacy. In addition, Japan is committed to further deepening its security cooperation with partner countries, such as ASEAN, India, and Australia, with which it shares strategic interests.

In particular, North Korea is a real threat not only to Japan, but also to ASEAN countries, including the Philippines, and the international community as a whole. In dealing with this situation, the international community needs to put maximum pressure on North Korea to change its policies.

In addition, the situation in the South China Sea has not improved. The important thing is to keep pursuing non-militarization in the South China Sea by

advancing the COC negotiations between ASEAN and China and continuously pushing for the basic principles of the rule of law and freedom of navigation. This is exactly the point included in the Joint Communiqué of the 50th ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting released in August this year. Japan will also appeal for the importance of these basic principles with the ASEAN countries, including the Philippines.

It is also important to maintain and strengthen free and open maritime order based on the rule of law, which is the cornerstone of stability and prosperity in the international community. When President Trump of the United States came to Japan last week, we agreed to promote concrete cooperation in making the Indo-Pacific region the core of the world's vitality, free, and open international public goods, which could help bring stability and prosperity to all countries. Japan believes that it is possible to cooperate with any country in achieving a free and open Indo-Pacific as long as we share these values. I will call for cooperation at the ASEAN-related summit meetings from tomorrow.