

Japan will support the peace building efforts in Myanmar to the best of its abilities: Mr. Toro Kono

Following is the exclusive interview with Japanese Foreign Minister Mr. Toro Kono, who arrived in Myanmar on Thursday.

What is the aim of your visit to Myanmar?

During President U Htin Kyaw's visit to Japan in December, he and Prime Minister Abe of Japan had candid exchange of views over Japanese assistance for Myanmar's nation-building efforts as well as the situation in Rakhine State, among others. The main objective of my visit is to reiterate Japan's commitment to extending full support for the democratic nation-building of Myanmar, and to follow up on the President's visit to Japan by discussing specific measures with the senior leaders of the Government and the Tatmadaw. I also look forward to visiting the Thilawa Special Economic Zone, where I hope to help facilitate further investment by highlighting, to the domestic and international audience, examples of successful cooperation between the public and private sectors of both countries. I want to use this visit as an opportunity to reflect further on ways in which Japan can work with Myanmar for the peace and prosperity of this country.

How do you think about the future vision of bilateral relations between Japan and Myanmar?

Under the "Free and Open India-Pacific Strategy," Japan aims to achieve peace and stability throughout this region, by maintaining and strengthening the rule-based, free and open maritime order and making it a global commons that brings stability and prosperity to all countries without discrimination. Japan hopes to shape ideas for cooperation with Myanmar under this strategy, and extend our utmost assistance to the efforts by the Myanmar Government for democracy, progress in the peace process, and economic development.

The Thilawa Special Economic Zone is an important symbolic project precisely from this viewpoint. Anchored in Yangon, the public and private sectors of Japan and Myanmar work together to bring in foreign in-

vestment, trigger economic boost for growth which would lead to the creation of a region-wide economic sphere in the Indo-Pacific, which would in turn enhance the connectivity between Myanmar and other regions. I believe that it is in both our national interest for our two countries to work together so that this success story can be expanded to tie into a wider development of Myanmar's and the region's economy as a whole.

Furthermore, attaining peace and national reconciliation in Myanmar will be extremely important for the peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region. I strongly hope to see the Government of Myanmar, Tatmadaw and armed ethnic groups concluding the national ceasefire agreement and making progress in the peace process, so that more and more people would be able to taste the fruit of peace. Japan will support the peace building efforts in Myanmar to the best of its abilities, as this is something that the Myanmar people aspire to.

Could you specify the usage of 800 billion Japanese yen that Japan pledged to provide as an aid to Myanmar?

In 2016, the Japanese Government announced plans to contribute 800 billion yen over five years at public and private levels, based on the "Japan-Myanmar Cooperation Program", to support Myanmar's efforts for peace, national reconciliation and economic development. Particularly in the area of economic development, we regard the

urban development in Yangon Region, transportation sector and electric power sector as the three main pillars of cooperation.

By implementing cooperation under these three pillars, Japan will aim to get to a point by 2020 where Myanmar people can actually feel the difference in their lives. For example, we plan to provide new train cars that will run at the maximum speed of 100 kilometers per hour between Yangon and Taungoo by September 2020, and to start operation all the way up to Mandalay by 2023. This will shorten the travel time between Yangon and Taungoo by half from the current seven hours to three and a half hours, and we will be able to reach Mandalay in as few as eight hours. As a result, the flow of goods and people between the biggest and second biggest commercial capitals, namely Yangon and Mandalay, will become smoother and push up people's living standards as well as the economy itself.

Japan is also advancing the Yangon Circular Railway Line Upgrading Project, under which 18 new train coaches will be operated by September 2020 and the number of trains operated per day will increase from 120 to 180 in 2022. With this, we can expect a significant drop in traffic congestion in Yangon. Through these projects and the development of Yangon Central Station area etc. being planned by Japanese companies, I believe we will be able to present a new image of urban life to the people of Myanmar. We will continue to support Myanmar's efforts of

nation-building in other areas too, and consult the Myanmar Government closely.

What is Japan's assistance in Myanmar's agricultural development?

Agriculture is a key industry in Myanmar, and the Government of Myanmar considers agricultural development as an economic policy priority. For its part, the Japanese Government is undertaking efforts to raise agricultural productivity in Myanmar, in order to improve the livelihoods of farmers who account for 60% of the population and to ensure that the rural areas share the prosperity of urban cities like Yangon. To be more specific, Japan will provide assistance to the Myanmar Government-led Agricultural Income Improvement Project for the Shwebo irrigation area of Sagaing Region, located northwest of Mandalay. Japan's assistance includes the development of irrigation facilities, fields and related infrastructure such as roads linking farms to markets. Japan also plans to carry out technical cooperation, including agricultural water management and support to model farmers. Our intention is to demonstrate agricultural development models whilst calling upon private investments. If this project implemented by Myanmar becomes successful with the support of Japan, we hope that it can be expanded to include other regions and contribute greatly to rural development in Myanmar.

How does Japan see the situation in Rakhine State, and how do you intend to assist in the future?

The Japanese Government has been continuing direct dialogue with the Myanmar Government and the Tatmadaw on the situation in Rakhine State. Japan considers it important for the Myanmar Government to restore security and safety on the ground in a manner that takes account of human rights. It is also Japan's strong hope and expectation that, under the Committee for the Union Enterprise for Humanitarian Assistance,

Resettlement and Development in Rakhine, formed by State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, good progress can be seen on: 1) better humanitarian access including by the UN; 2) safe and voluntary return and resettlement of displaced persons; and 3) addressing the root causes of this issue through the implementation of the Kofi Annan Report's recommendations.

It is the policy of the Japanese Government to support these efforts by Myanmar Government. Last month, Prime Minister Abe conveyed to President U Htin Kyaw Japan's assistance for the construction of tarred roads, the upgrading of electric power lines and the construction of 15 schools in Rakhine State. Moreover, taking the opportunity of my visit, the Japanese Government has decided to provide an emergency assistance focusing specifically on the imminent return and resettlement of those who have fled, providing 3 million dollars' worth of necessary supplies for returnees through the Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement. Japan has also been providing, and will continue to provide, assistance urgently needed by the people in Rakhine State through international organisations.

I would like to mention that Japanese Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) have been doing good work in Rakhine State for some time. Bridge Asia Japan (BAJ) has been providing vocational and skills training, as well as assistance to maintain community infrastructures. Further, the BAJ, funded by the Nippon Foundation, has constructed 100 schools. These activities are designed to provide opportunities for the youth and children from various communities, including Buddhists as well as Muslims, to learn together and deepen mutual understanding. It is my strong desire to see this kind of grassroots activities continue to be expanded.

I am convinced that Japan's assistance will contribute to advancing the efforts of the Government and the people of Myanmar.—Myanmar News Agency ■



Japanese Foreign Minister Mr. Toro Kono