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INTERVIEW TARO KONO

'People-to-people exchange between Nepal and Japan will further increase'

Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Kono is arriving in Kathmandu today on a two-day official visit at the invitation of Foreign Minister Pradeep Gyawali. Kono's visit comes less than two months after Gyawali's trip to Tokyo and is the first visit to Nepal by the top Japanese diplomat in seven years. Ahead of his visit, Kono talked about his trip and the relationship between the two countries.

You are the first Foreign Minister of Japan to visit Nepal since 2012. What is the main purpose of your visit?

The reason behind my Nepal visit is to consolidate the friendship between both nations through economic cooperation in various sectors such as economic development, stability of democracy, enhancement of governance to further improve our good relations. Nepal is not only a good friend of ours but also an important country for the stability and prosperity of the international community.

Last November, Minister for Foreign Affairs Pradeep Gyawali visited Japan. This time I came here at the invitation of Minister Gyawali.

Apart from meeting with Minister Gyawali and other top officials of the Government of Nepal, I am delighted to see the Himalaya peaks and to visit cul-

tural heritage sites in Kathmandu Valley.

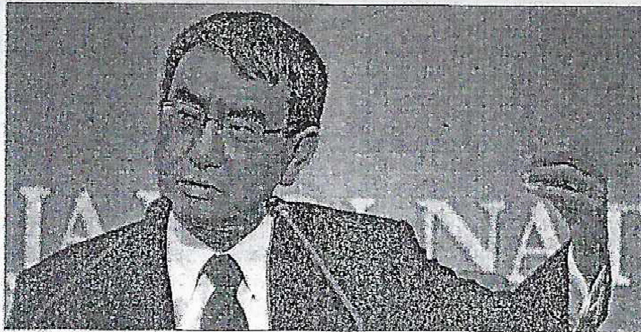
Following the establishment of diplomatic relations between Nepal and Japan in 1956, we have been maintaining our special friendship through economic cooperation, culture, tourism, and grass-roots exchange. In addition, our two countries have always supported each other during difficult times.

Nepali people living in Japan visited affected areas of the Great East Japan Earthquake of 2011, and the 2016 earthquake in Kumamoto soon after the disasters struck and encouraged the quake affected people with freshly cooked Dal-Bhat and warm Nepali coffee.

Likewise, Japan provided assistance to Nepal during the 2015 earthquake by sending emergency rescuers and relief materials as well as cooperating in the reconstruction of schools, residential homes to make Nepal a strong nation to withstand natural disaster. The friendship between Nepal and Japan is based on mutual respect and sympathy both nations show during these difficult times.

Taking advantage of my visit this time, we would like to further enhance cooperation between Nepal and Japan for regional stability and development.

In the future, what are the sectors



■ Japan's Foreign Minister Taro Kono.

you think have the potential for broader development in Japan-Nepal relations?

People-to-people exchange between the two countries has been increasing exponentially in recent years. In 2017, over 27,000 Japanese nationals visited Nepal, while the number of Nepali visitors to Japan has reached over 39,000.

I feel that people-to-people exchange between Nepal and Japan will further increase after the resumption of direct flights between the two nations in the

near future.

For the 2020 Tokyo Olympics and Paralympics, Tamura city of Fukushima, Komagane city of Nagano and Kobe city of Hyogo are planning to be host town for the Nepali team. I strongly believe that through these host towns, the exchange between athletes and local people of the two countries will further strengthen.

Besides these exchanges, I also expect relations between the two countries in tourism sector to expand. Nepal has numerous beautiful mountains and historical heritage sites. Lured by the beauty of Nepal, many Japanese are visiting the country and indulged in trekking activities. Like I mentioned earlier, I am confident that many Japanese tourists will come to Nepal, if direct flights are to be operated. Japan is willing to help Nepal's tourism development through various tourism-affiliated conferences. There are a number of avenues for expanding the relations between the two countries. And I will continue to work on it.

Japan has long been supporting Nepal's development as an integral friend. What's your perspective on Japanese government's development aid to Nepal? What are the priority sectors of Japan's aid?

Japan has been extending support to Nepal's development as a friend for a long time. Japan has been assisting Nepal in agriculture, health care, education, transportation, electricity, consolidation of democracy and peace-building among other sectors.

Nepal is striving to consolidate democracy and become a middle-income country after successfully holding elections based on the new constitution following the devastating earthquake in 2015.

Encouraging Nepal's campaign of "Prosperous Nepal, Happy Nepali" (Sambriddha Nepal, Sukhi Nepali), Japan will continue to support Nepal in four key areas: (1) Recovery from the earthquake and disaster resilient nation-building; (2) Social and economic infrastructure development; (3) Poverty reduction and improvement of quality of life; (4) Enhancement of governance and development of basic framework of democracy.

In addition, agriculture is Nepal's key sector as around 60 percent of its population is engaged in agriculture. As the current Japanese ambassador to Nepal Masamichi Saigo is an agricultural expert, Japan also plans to support Nepal in increasing its agriculture productivity. I strongly hope that Japan's support will further strengthen Nepal's development and Japan-Nepal relations.