

Japan's top diplomat due today for 3-day visit

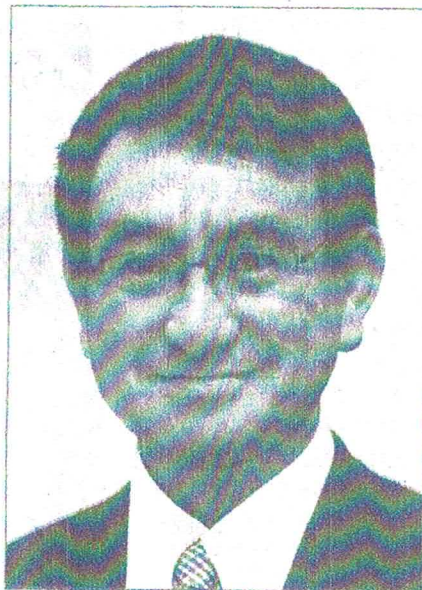
By ROY C. MANASA

Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Kono will be arriving in the Philippines today, February 9, for a three-day official visit aimed at further boosting the strategic partnership and cooperation between Manila and Tokyo.

Kono will be flying to Davao City to meet with President Rodrigo Duterte and other key Cabinet officials for a bilateral discussion on areas of mutual interest, including Japan's support for the country's infrastructure development and for Mindanao following the successful conduct of the plebiscite on the Bangsamoro Organic Law (BOL).

He will also lead the opening ceremony of the Consulate-General of Japan in Davao City.

"The ties between Japan and the



TARO KONO

Philippines can be described as a deep and warm family or brotherly relationship. I hope my visit to the Philippines this time will help deepen the bond between the two countries in the 'Golden Age,'" Kono told the Manila Bulletin on Friday, in response to a set of written questions earlier sent to his office in Tokyo.

This is Kono's third visit to the country since assuming his post as Japan's top diplomat in August 2017. The Philippines was also the first country he visited as foreign minister when he attended the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) commemorative meetings hosted by the Philippines in August and November of that same year.

While in Davao, Kono will also visit the Mindanao Koku-

Japan's top diplomat... ◀1

sai Daigaku (Mindanao International College) to interact with "nikkeijin" or Filipinos who are of Japanese descendants, and join other guests in tasting his favorite tropical fruit, durian.

People-to-people ties

Kono emphasized that the bilateral relations between Japan and the Philippines have never been as favorable and robust since the re-establishment of the diplomatic relations some 63 years ago.

"In the various fields such as politics, security, economy, culture, and people-to-people exchanges, the strategic partnership between the two countries is now in the 'golden age' as stated by President (Rodrigo) Duterte," noted Kono, adding that Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and President Duterte have already held six summit meetings since the latter took office in 2016.

He recalled the historical significance of opening a full-pledged consular office in Davao, a place where many Japanese nationals migrated before World War II and engaged not only in abaca farming but also in infrastructure development such as power generation, railways, and roads. Japan's first consular office in Davao opened in 1920, "which means that the Consulate-General has a history of about 100 years."

"I am confident that the bond between the people of our two countries will become even stronger as the Consulate-General opened in Davao, a city with a historic connection with Japan," he said.

Over the last six years, Kono noted that the number of Filipino visitors to Japan has increased by six-fold, now exceeding the 500,000 marks. On the other hand, many Japanese students aspiring to study overseas, mostly to learn English, are now heading for the Philippines.

He likewise paid tribute to the remarkable achievements being made by Japanese-Filipino athletes such as Takayasu and Mitakeumi in the field of Sumo, the traditional Japanese wrestling.

"People-to-people relations form the

foundation of unwavering bilateral relations," Kono said.

Peace in Mindanao

Now that the BOL has been fully ratified, and with the expected establishment of the Bangsamoro Transition Authority, Kono admitted that the Mindanao peace process is now entering a "crucial phase."

"While maintaining regional security, we also need to implement the decommissioning of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) combatants in a smooth manner," he said.

During the January 21 plebiscite, the Japanese government sent the largest and the only political-level monitoring mission among all foreign countries headed by Parliamentary Vice-Minister Norikazu Suzuki.

Days after the first phase of the BOL plebiscite, however, separate explosions rocked a Catholic cathedral in Jolo and a mosque in Zamboanga City, leaving over 20 dead and almost a hundred injured.

"I would like to express my sincere condolence and sympathy, on behalf of the Government and people of Japan, to those who were killed or wounded in the bombing incidents in Jolo, Sulu, and Zamboanga city.

Despite all the challenges, Kono reiterated Japan's commitment to support the attainment of peace and progress in Mindanao.

"In order to realize permanent peace in Mindanao, it is important that as many residents as possible feel the benefits of peace. Japan will always stand by the Bangsamoro people and respond to progress in the peace process by strengthening its support to Mindanao," he said.

As proof of their commitment, Kono said Japan has been consistently supporting the Mindanao peace process for over 10 years.

Since 2006, Japan has poured in some P13 billion worth of assistance that funded more than 800 community infrastructure projects, including schools and clinics under the Japan Bangsamoro Initiatives

for Reconstruction and Development (J-BIRD). In addition, Japan has been focused on face-to-face assistance by dispatching development experts to the International Monitoring Team (IMT) based in Cotabato City.

Defense and security alliance

Given the fast-changing security landscape in the region, Kono assured that Japan will closely cooperate with the Philippines and other countries concerned, in taking concrete actions to ensure that the freedom of navigation and the rule of law spread and take root.

"Japan will continue efforts to realize a 'free and open Indo-Pacific.' The free and open maritime order based on the rule of law and the safety of sea lanes constitutes a cornerstone for stability and prosperity of the international community," the foreign minister said.

Japan's cooperation with the Philippines will include the enhancement of connectivity through the development of quality infrastructure based on international standards, and provide capacity-building assistance in maritime security.

Following the signing of the defense agreement between Manila and Tokyo in February 2016, both countries are expected to increase their military engagements via joint exercises and more frequent port visits of ships and aircrafts.

In June 2017 and September 2018 respectively, the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (SDF) escort ships "Izumo" and "Kaga" paid goodwill visits to the Philippines.

Kono said other examples of security cooperation include Japan's participation in the U.S.-Philippine joint exercise "Kamandag," transfer of the maritime training aircraft TC-90, capacity-building assistance for ship maintenance, and goodwill exercise by Maritime SDF aircraft P-1 and Philippine Navy aircraft C-90 (former TC-90).

"What is important is that Japan and the Philippines, partners who share basic values and strategic interests, cooperate hand in hand for the stability and prosperity of this region," he said.

Filipino workers

Due to the current serious labor shortage in Japan, the Japanese Parliament has recently modified an immigration law that would allow the entry of foreign workers – including Filipinos – in 14 different fields to fill-up an estimated 345,000 job posts in the next five years.

"We believe that having more competent Filipino workers fully demonstrating their abilities under the new system is beneficial not only to respond to the shortage of workers in Japan but also to the promotion of friendship and mutual understanding at the grassroots level of both countries," Kono said.

According to the Japanese official, the newly-created status of residence called 'Specified Skilled Worker' would allow foreign workers to fill-up jobs where

securing human resources is "particularly difficult."

In order to work in Japan under the new system, Kono said technical skills and Japanese language capability are necessary.

Earlier reports have indicated that some of the job sectors that may be allowed to acquire foreign workers under the scheme are in the fields of nursing care, agriculture, fishery, materials processing, industrial machinery, construction, shipbuilding, vehicle maintenance, among others.

Under the new system, companies that accept or hire foreign workers are required to pay a salary equal to or more than the equivalent amount of Japanese workers who are engaged in the same job.