

The beautiful island nation of Palau is Pacific family to Japan

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Palau is a beautiful island nation in the Pacific Ocean. I am honored to be able to visit this country, with its historical ties to Japan, as Japan's Minister for Foreign Affairs.

The encounter of Japan and Palau dates back to 200 years ago when a Japanese ship, the Jinja Maru, drifted and reached the shores of Palau in February 1821. Then, in the early 20th century, many Japanese crossed the sea and settled here in Palau.

Palau then has become a country that has experienced significant development under the outstanding leadership of successive presidents after the era of the International Trusteeship. Palau has become a country that hosts international conferences and attracts many dignitaries from around the world, as was the case last month when President Whipps hosted the Our Ocean Conference.

At the same time, the traditions and culture of Japan left behind by those Japanese of the past, including many Japanese-derived words in the Palauan language, are still alive and well in Palau. Whenever I unexpectedly come into contact with them, I cannot help but feel that Japan and Palau are once again members of the same family in the Pacific and irreplaceable partners to one another.

The special relationship between Japan and Palau is not unrelated to the international situation at hand. Casting a gaze at events abroad, Russia's aggression against Ukraine has shaken the very foundations of the international community. Any unilateral attempt to change the status quo by force is absolutely unacceptable.

As responsible members of the international community, it is more important than ever for Japan and Palau to cooperate with each other, for we are countries that share fundamental values such as freedom, democracy, and the rule of law. It is imperative that we build an international order based on rules such as freedom

of navigation and the rule of law, rather than through the assertion of "force".

I am convinced of the enormous potential of the bilateral relationship between Japan and Palau. As part of our efforts to realize a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific," I look forward to working with Palau more closely than ever for the sake of peace and stability in the international community.

Over the past 20 years, Japan has been holding the Pacific Islands Leaders Meeting every three years with the countries of the Pacific region to discuss various issues surrounding the region with Pacific island countries. At the 9th Pacific Islands Leaders Meeting held last July, which was attended by President Whipples, Japan announced five priority areas of support for Pacific countries under the "Pacific Bond Policy", those being; (1) COVID-19 Response and Recovery, (2) Sustainable Oceans based on the Rule of Law, (3) Climate Change and Disaster Resilience, (4) Strengthening Foundation for Sustainable and Resilient Economic Development, and (5) People-to-People Exchanges and Human Resource Development.

In order to bring all this to fruition, Japan has provided assistance to Palau in various fields. For example, it has contributed to healthcare including in the response to COVID-19, in maritime areas such as coast guard and fisheries promotion, and in climate change, environmental conservation, and disaster prevention.

Moreover, in relation to high-quality infrastructure development, an area where Japan has a distinct advantage, Japan has proudly provided assistance to a number of projects such as the Japan-Palau Friendship Bridge connecting Koror and Babeldaob Island, the new National Landfill, and the Palau International Coral Reef Center, which conducts conservation activities for coral reefs which are an important tourist resource for Palau.

To coincide with my visit, a grand completion ceremony of the Palau International Airport will be held to mark the renovation of the terminal buildings by Japan. I am confident that this terminal will serve as the gateway not only to Palau, but also to the Pacific Island region, and will be the key to improving connectivity in the region. My hope is that its use will mark a new chapter in the history of our two countries, and serve as proof of the special relationship between Japan and Palau.

Finally, it is self-evident that the friendship between Japan and Palau has been supported by people-to-people ties at all levels. The time has come to overcome border restrictions and revitalize people-to-people exchanges, renew interpersonal connections and promote efforts in human resource development. I therefore sincerely hope that my visit to Palau will be an opportunity for the resumption of exchanges between Japan and Palau.