

The Ties that Bind - Fiji and Japan, two friends united by the Pacific Ocean.

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Fiji is a regional "hub" located in the heart of the Pacific Island countries and regions. I am honored to have this opportunity to visit Fiji, a bedrock of peace and stability in the region, as the first stop on my inaugural trip to Pacific Island countries since my appointment as Minister for Foreign Affairs.

On July 26 2021, Japan played its first match against Fiji in the men's rugby sevens competition at the Tokyo 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games. Japan lost 19-24, but Fiji went on to the finals and won the gold medal.

The Fijiana sevens team also won the women's bronze medal, and thus Fijian rugby took the world by storm. I heard that due to COVID-19, Captain Tuwai went through four months of particular hardship including being separated from his family and having to primarily focus on training. I would like to congratulate and pay tribute to Fiji's both Rugby teams and how they managed to overcome COVID-19 in order to capture the gold and bronze medals respectively.

In addition to these exchanges over rugby, many people-to-people exchanges have been fostered between Japan and Fiji. The history shared between Japan and Fiji dates back around 100 years when sugar cane workers first arrived from Japan. Nowadays Fiji is a friend to us linked by the Pacific Ocean, and is an irreplaceable partner for Japan, as relations have deepened in various fields such as politics, economics, and culture.

When we Japanese hear the name of the country, Fiji, images of vibrant, beautiful blue seas, traditional culture, sports, together with the natural friendliness and warm hospitality of the Fijians immediately spring to mind. Nadi has become a popular destination for young Japanese students who also enjoy resorts. In terms of bilateral relations, the themes of meetings between dignitaries from both countries, which used to focus mainly on economic cooperation, are now steadily broadening to include security, climate change, and people-to-people exchanges.

At present, the foundations of the international community have been shaken to the core by Russia's aggression against Ukraine. Any unilateral attempt to change the status quo by force is absolutely unacceptable. As responsible members

of the international community, and as countries that share such fundamental values as freedom, democracy, and the rule of law, Japan and Fiji must step up cooperation to further enhance our bilateral relationship in order to build an international order based on the rule of law and freedom of navigation rather than through the assertion of "force".

I would like to use this visit as an opportunity to work even more closely with Fiji for the realization of a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" and for the peace and stability of 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 concerning the region. At the 9th Pacific Islands Leaders Meeting held last July, which was attended by Prime Minister Bainimarama, 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 ongoing assistance to Fiji in various fields. For example, it has contributed to healthcare including in the response to COVID -19, in maritime areas such as fisheries promotion, and in climate change, environmental conservation, and disaster prevention. Among these, especially for support in the response to COVID -19, we have provided rapid provision of vaccines through COVAX, as well as emergency assistance yen loans for financial support totaling 20 billion yen (about \$364.2 million Fiji dollars). In addition, we have actively supported infrastructure development from the perspective of establishing sustainable, resilient economic and social development. The Reconstruction of Tamavua-i-wai Bridge over Queens Road, the most important arterial road in Suva, is but one example. I would therefore like to use this opportunity to hereby pledge Japan's continued support for Fiji.

Finally, it is self-evident that the relationship between our countries has been robustly supported by the friendship between our peoples. While COVID -19 has restricted travel, it is important that this be overcome, as demonstrated by the Fijian rugby teams. I am confident that Japanese visitors to Fiji will deepen their ties with their Fijian neighbors, and that the bonds fostered between the youth of our two countries will be passed on from generation to generation. It is

thus my sincere hope that my visit to Fiji will be an opportunity to further deepen the ties of friendship between Japan and Fiji.