

Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida's article contributed to LA ESTRELLA, Panama
on 2 May 2013

Last October's successful visit to Japan of President Ricardo Martinelli Berrocal and Mrs. Marta Linares de Martinelli, which marked a step forward in establishing a new Japan-Panama relationship, is still fresh in our minds. At the meeting with the Japanese leader, President Martinelli described that Japan and Panama, having enjoyed friendly relations for more than a century, "are more than friends, we are like brothers."

Our fraternal countries have in common a history of development resting on maritime trade. In this connection, we have maintained close relations, especially in the areas of shipping and commerce.

In Japan, what comes first to mind when people think of Panama is the Panama Canal. It is a well-known landmark that is introduced even in Japanese textbooks. Japan is the world's fourth largest user of the Panama Canal – a testament to the fact that the Canal is an important transportation artery for Japan. Furthermore, the ongoing work to expand the Canal is drawing the attention of not only the Japanese Government but also of Japanese industries. Nearly a century ago, there was a Japanese engineer in the Canal's construction team, and brought the technology back to Japan and made use of it for Japanese flood control projects. This historical fact offers an idea of the long-standing ties shared between Japan and the Panama Canal.

In addition to the Canal, Japanese companies are also paying attention to the importance of Panama for its stable and high economic growth and its function as a distribution hub to the Latin America and the Caribbean region. I expect that Japan-Latin America and the Caribbean relations will develop further with Panama serving as a gateway for the entry of more Japanese companies into Latin America and the Caribbean.

Today, democracy has firmly taken root in Latin America and the Caribbean, and the region is a growth center for the global economy similar to Asia.

Sharing as we do basic values such as democracy and the rule of law, Latin America and the Caribbean are regarded by Japan as important partners in the international community. Japan and Latin America and the Caribbean are engaged in close cooperation in responding to various issues that face the world, including climate

change, disarmament and non-proliferation.

In the realm of economic relations, Latin America and the Caribbean are partners with which we will develop together, as Japan strives to revitalize its economy. Latin America and the Caribbean have a growing market, with a population of 600 million people, and is also an important supplier of resources and food to Japan. Over the last five years the number of Japanese companies operating in the region has increased by approximately 200.

Japan shares the principle of “social inclusion” upheld by many countries in Latin America and the Caribbean. Japan is committed to continuing to extend detailed assistance to the region to resolve city problems, eradicate poverty and eliminate disparities, to ensure that no one is left behind in the shadows of economic growth.

For Japan, Panama, is a critical neighbor across the Pacific Ocean, as well as a partner with which bonds of friendship have been forged over the course of a century. In the context of our long history, I am extremely honored to be the first Japanese foreign minister to pay a visit to Panama. By seeing with my own eyes the Panama of today and conversing with my Panamanian friends, I hope that my visit will contribute to further deepening our bonds of friendship. <END>