

AMBASSADOR ITO FOR ALBANIAN DAILY NEWS

Backing Albania's Development and Democratization

"Japan considers Albania as an important country which serves to the economic and political stabilization of the Western Balkan region. We fully support Albania's political, economic and social development as well as its democratization, as it also serves to the region as a whole," said Ambassador Ito

by Genc Mlloja

SENIOR DIPLOMATIC EDITOR



Ambassador of Japan to Albania, Mr. Makoto Ito

The bilateral relations between Japan and Albania have developed tremendously, especially in the fields of economy, culture, education and many more areas and bilateral exchanges have taken place as well during the one-year span of time since the opening of the Japanese Embassy in Tirana last year.

This was the assessment of Japanese Ambassador to Albania Makoto Ito in an exclusive interview with Albanian Daily News which coincided with the first anniversary of the opening of the Japanese Embassy in Tirana. Mr. Ito made a resume of the course of the diplomatic relations between Tirana and Tokyo which were established in 1921 and restored in 1981, while the Albanian Embassy in Japan opened in 2005. "Here we are on the 1st anniversary of the opening of our Embassy in Albania," said the Ambassador, who highlighted that since 2008 the Japanese government has established an office of the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) in Tirana, an office which has been operating in Albania for 10 years now, allowing the economic rela-

tions between our countries to flourish.

Tokyo's top envoy to Tirana was not satisfied by the level of trade relations between the two countries, but he believes that there is potential to do so much more in the future. But the picture is different with regard to the assistance provided to the Albanian Government and the Albania people since the opening of the Japanese Embassy.

"This year, the total amount of donations, loans and disaster relief donations reached approximately 11 million euros," revealed Mr. Ito, who brought to the attention the activity of JICA and its projects providing to the Government of Albania the necessary financial support, technical assistance as well as transfer of competence and knowledge, to promote the domestic geographic information development. When targeting the people's needs, the Ambassador said the Government of Japan focused on four main areas: education, sustainable economic development and social inclusion, health and environmental protection.

The Ambassador also touched upon issues of Ja-

pan's stance with regard to Western Balkans, its relations with neighbors and other countries and made an overview of the socio-economic situation of Japan in the interview which follows:

- Mr. Ambassador, in the first place allow me to congratulate you upon the first anniversary of the opening of Japan's Embassy in Tirana followed by your credentials on June 6, 2017. How do you feel in such an anniversary because, to be frank with you, it seems to me that time has passed so fast as I had the honor to attend the reception with the participation of State Minister for Foreign Affairs Mr. Nobuo Kishi hosted by you for the establishment of the Embassy of Japan in Tirana?

- Initially I want to thank you for the opportunity to have this interview. I feel very happy with the way things have progressed during last year, since the opening of the Embassy in January.

You are right, time has passed very fast, and many things have happened. Our bilateral relations have developed tremendously, especially in the fields of economy,

culture, education and many more areas. Bilateral exchanges have taken place as well, as you mentioned the visit of State Minister Kishi, at the Ceremony to celebrate the official opening of the Embassy was one of the highlights of our bilateral exchanges last year.

- Albanian-Japanese relations have an old tradition but taking the opportunity of this anniversary how would you assess their course?

- Our diplomatic relations were established in 1921 and restored in 1981, the Albanian Embassy in Japan opened in 2005, and here we are on the 1st anniversary of the opening of our Embassy in Albania. Furthermore since 2008, the government of Japan has established an office of the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) in Tirana, an office which has been operating in Albania for 10 years now, allowing the economic relations between our countries to flourish.

At the moment we want to further develop the traditionally good relations between Japan and Albania, concentrating mainly in fields such as economy, trade, tourism and

of course investments.

- As a follow up to this, Mr. Ambassador could you make a wrap up of the concrete bilateral exchanges between the two countries? Which are some of the fields that have prospered and in which ones much more can be done? For example, figures on trade relations are as following: from Japan to Albania approximately 1.2 million Euro, while from Albania to Japan approximately 6.5 million Euro...

- Yes, you are right, trade relations between our countries are still not at a satisfying level, as I believe that there is potential to do so much more. At the moment Japan is importing from Albania minerals such as chrome as well as a small selection of agricultural products.

It would be great to widen this importing list including some Albanian brands of wine or olive oil, which are of very good quality. In terms of export, Japan mainly exports to Albania machineries or machinery pieces.

- But an overview of Japan's economic assistance to Albania in 2017 reveals

State Minister for Foreign Affairs Mr. Nobuo Kishi in Tirana



impressive figures- many important projects in different fields, especially projects related to people's needs. Please, can you highlight some of the most important ones, and which is their impact on the areas where they are applied?

- Since the opening of the Embassy, Japan has tried to provide assistance to the Albanian Government and the Albania people. This year, the total amount of donations, loans and disaster relief donations reached approximately 11 million euros.

We started in July donating 129 hybrid and eco cars to the Albanian government, while a few months later we initiated a Project on Geospatial Information aiming to enhance the social and economic developments activities of the Areas of Durres and Tirana. Through this JICA project Japan provides to the Government of Albania the necessary financial support, technical assistance as well as transfer of competence and knowledge, to promote the domestic geographic information development.

When targeting the people's needs, the Government of Japan focused in four main

areas: education, and in this context we assisted in the reconstruction of 3 schools in Northern Albania; sustainable economic development and social inclusion, which JICA is trying to address through the "Smallholder Families Financial Inclusion Project", aiming to improve the financial inclusion of 40,000 rural smallholder families into the market; health which is being achieved through the donation of USD 500,000 worth of medical equipment to the "Mother Teresa" University Hospital Center and environmental protection, donating 72,754 euros to the Municipality of Tirana, in order to provide a new waste collection truck, along with 50 new bins for the Grand Park of Tirana.

- Japan is a well-known country in Albania. Can it be said that Japanese have information on Albania, the opportunities it offers, history, tradition, culture etc? How much is 'cultural diplomacy' being used to get our people closer and promote tourism, people-to-people exchanges?

- Frankly speaking, information on Albania, in Japan

is quite scarce. However, I believe that the Albanian history, culture and art will be able to attract the interest of Japanese citizens, and make it possible for more and more tourists to visit Albania. There have been some attempts this year to strengthen not only cultural relations but also relations in the field of tourism and education between Japan and Albania.

There have been visits of representatives of various tourist agencies and journalist, coming both to Albania and Japan in an attempt to strengthen relations in the field of tourism. In terms of culture, our Embassy has invited in May a Japanese contemporary dancer to perform in Tirana, while in June we are expecting the arrival of two Japanese traditional musicians, so that the Albanian citizens can become better acquainted with the Japanese music of "shamisen" and "taiko".

- Your Excellency, in January 2018 Japan launched the new "Cooperation Initiative in the Western Balkans", following the visit of Prime Minister Abe to some regional countries. In addition it was announced the appointment of an Ambassador in charge of Western Balkans. Two questions, firstly what has led your country to undertake such an initiative, and secondly which is its significance in face of the 'Berlin Process' and the Chinese 16+1 Initiative in the region? Is there any 'touch' of competition?

- Japan considers Albania as an important country which serves to the economic and political stabilization of the Western Balkan region. In this context the position of the Japanese Government is to fully support Albania's political, economic and social development as well as its democratization, as it also serves to the region as a whole. Our Government considers important that the European Union Member Countries as well as other countries show interest in development not only of Albania, but of the entire region.

- In the meantime, Your Excellency, could you share with our readers some of the main guidelines of your foreign policy, especially vis-a-vis the region and matters related to North Korea, China and Russia?

- Establishing stable and friendly relations with our neighbors is very important to Japan, especially when speaking in terms of foreign and homeland security. In this sense enhancing the relations with neighboring countries, is one of the main pillars of Japan's foreign policy as a basis for making more stable the environment around Japan. The relations with China and Russia constitute one of Japan's important bilateral relationships, and consequently it is important for us to build a cooperative relationship.

However, we cannot accept the North Korean nuclear development and the repeated launches of ballistic missiles over our territory. I strongly hope that these problems will be resolved, as well as the issue of abductions of Japanese citizens by North Korea, which not only poses

concerns to the sovereignty of Japan, the lives and safety of Japanese citizens but can also be considered an universal matter of the entire international community as it constitutes a violation of the fundamental human rights.

- In conclusion, Mr. Ambassador can you make an overview of the socio-economic situation of Japan, and in the sense of globalization what is official Tokyo offering to cope with critical situations in different parts of the world?

- The Japanese society is facing many challenges caused by a rapidly aging society and actual population decline. The population issue is significant, with a broad range of consequences both socially and economically. It is caused by a combination of the highest life expectancy at 84 years, and a low birthrate of new children, 1.4% in 2013. We want to share our experience with other countries which are currently facing the same phenomena, in order to find better ways to cope with the problems such a situation causes.

In terms of global issue Japan is mainly concerned by two main issues, international terrorism and climate change. Japan is directly involved in world tensions resulting from the threat of terrorism. Japanese citizens have been victims of kidnapping and execution in Syria, and 7 Japanese aid workers lost their lives in the terrorist attacks in Bangladesh. Japan wants to contribute to international cooperation in combating this threat as a responsible member of the international community.

Climate Change is also an important issue for Japan and the "Paris Agreement" is considered by us as fair and effective framework that provides for the good setting and submission of greenhouse gas emission reduction goals by each country independently, with no distinction between developing and developed countries and for the implementation of initiatives towards the achievement of these goals.



Tirana Mayor signed a cooperation agreement with the Ambassador of Japan