

Building a new Japan

BY YOSHIHIKO NODA

March 11 is etched in Japan's collective consciousness. Today, on the first anniversary of the Great East Japan Earthquake, which triggered the starkest crisis our country has faced in a generation, we pause to commemorate all of those who suffered. Our thoughts go out to all of the victims of the tragedy and to people around the world whose lives have been devastated by natural disasters.

We will not forget the loved ones, friends and colleagues lost in the disaster. Nor will we forget the outpouring of support and international expressions of solidarity that Japan received. For this, we feel deeply indebted and forever appreciative.

Japan has made remarkable progress over the past 12 months. Today we renew our commitment to learn from the great difficulties we have faced. I firmly believe that this period of difficulty must, and will, come to mark the start of a full-fledged revitalization of Japan.

The national solidarity and sense of urgency that resulted from last year's tragedy underscore that we have the collective will to tackle our most pressing issues: reconstruction of areas affected by the earthquake; full decommissioning of Tokyo Electric Power Co.'s Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station and decontamination of affected areas; and revitalization of the Japanese economy.

The many steps taken in a year included establishing a budgetary and legislative framework that laid out many of the strategic tools for reconstruction. We set up the Reconstruction Agency, which acts as a control tower for all related planning and significantly streamlines and expedites activities, including formation of reconstruction grants and special reconstruction zones. In addition, procedures for monitoring and testing food products have been strengthened, while more than 1 trillion yen in state funds have been provided for the decontamination of residential areas close to the Fukushima Daiichi plant.

The issues of greatest concern among affected individuals, and our nation as a whole, are the most fundamental: job security and a sustainable livelihood for families. Through the creation of special

reconstruction zones and other initiatives under the concept of "open reconstruction," these regions will stimulate new domestic and overseas investment, creating jobs, driving the restoration of existing industries and enhancing innovation.

The creation of 11 "FutureCities" throughout Japan, in areas including the disaster-hit municipalities of Ofunato, Rikuzentakata and Higashimatsushima, is one such example. Through budgetary, tax and regulatory measures, support will be provided to develop an industry and social infrastructure linked with compact cities and decentralized, environmentally friendly energy production that uses "smart" grids and large-scale solar and offshore wind farms. Japan is already a leader in energy efficiency, and it has a wealth of innovative technologies. We must put this expertise to use creating a model for growth and sustainability that we can share with the world.

Another area where Japan can, and I believe must, lead the world and share its knowledge is disaster-risk reduction and response. We have learned, in the harshest possible terms, that it is no longer acceptable to claim that events had been unforeseen. To build resilient communities and a country able to withstand natural disasters, our disaster-management measures are being comprehensively reviewed, and I expect they will be dramatically strengthened.

Of course, Japan also faces challenges that were apparent before last year's earthquake, tsunami and nuclear disaster. We have been tackling some, such as securing robust economic growth and rebuilding government finances, for a number of years. The longer these issues are left unresolved, the more serious they become.

When I became prime minister last September, I promised the Japanese people that I would not tolerate the politics of indecision. A propensity to delay difficult and weighty decisions has been hurting our country. It is detrimental to our economy, society and future, and it cannot be allowed to continue.

The many projects underway for Japan's reconstruction and revitalization constitute the first step toward our country's economic revival. Securing robust

economic growth is a momentous challenge in the face of global economic uncertainty, the yen's historic appreciation and long-standing deflation — but it is not insurmountable.

We must draw on the unique strengths of the Japanese economy, seek an open and cooperative approach with our international partners, and intelligently exploit the promise of new growth areas. Sectors such as energy, the environment, health and nursing care hold significant potential as leading growth industries where Japan can tap innovative ideas and investment from the private sector, including foreign direct investment, and play a leading role globally. We aim to create the conditions to support increased international interest and investment in Japan, not only in business but also in tourism. As a prerequisite, we commit to providing timely and accurate information to the international community.

In recent history, Japan seized rapid economic expansion from the ashes and desolation of World War II, and we built the most energy-efficient economy in the world in the aftermath of the oil shock. On the anniversary of the Great East Japan Earthquake, we remember that today we face a challenge of similar proportions. Our goal is not simply to reconstruct the Japan that existed before March 11, 2011, but to build a new Japan. We are determined to overcome this historic challenge.

The writer is prime minister of Japan.