

Speech by Yoshitaka Murata,
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April 3, Panel Discussion on "Disaster Risk Reduction
and Sustainable Development

I am honored to be given the opportunity to participate in today's panel discussion on disaster risk reduction and sustainable development. I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to the representatives of the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), the United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UN/ISDR), the Parliament of Uganda and the government of Uganda for their efforts in preparing this meeting.

As you are well aware, Japan suffers from numerous natural disasters, including earthquakes, tsunami, volcanic eruptions, typhoons and flooding. Although we cannot prevent the occurrence of these natural phenomena, we can limit the resulting damage in order to protect lives and livelihoods from the threat of disaster. In the 1940s and 1950s, Japan lost several thousand victims whenever a major typhoon hit the country. From these terrible experiences, Japan became aware of the need for national policy to be founded on the protection of lives and property, and the Disaster Countermeasures Basic Act was enacted in 1961.

This led to the strengthening of comprehensive and systematic disaster prevention systems, investment in disaster-prevention projects, including the preservation of national land and the building of safe communities, and improvements in the awareness of the Japanese people. Over a period of more than thirty years after the Act was enacted, the number of victims of natural disasters was reduced to about two hundred each year. The progress made in disaster prevention measures helped to support Japan's period of high economic growth in the 1960s and later economic development.

However, in January 1995 the Great Hanshin Earthquake struck, directly hitting the major Japanese city of Kobe in Western Japan. More than two hundred and forty thousand buildings were destroyed, and more than six thousand precious lives were lost. Many of the destroyed buildings were built before stricter earthquake resistance standards were enforced in Japan in 1981. As a result, the government enacted laws to promote the earthquake-proofing of buildings, and carried out fundamental revisions to the Basic Disaster Prevention Plan, which provides basic guidance on disaster prevention policy, and at the same time strengthened Japan's natural disaster initial response system.

On the 11th of March last year, the Great East Japan Earthquake struck. A huge magnitude 9 earthquake occurred off Japan's coast, the largest earthquake ever recorded in Japanese history. More than nineteen thousand people were killed or went missing in the earthquake and the resulting giant tsunami, and an unprecedented disaster struck the country. The biggest challenge currently facing disaster prevention and administration is to make a thorough inspection of the response to the Great East Japan Earthquake, and to use the lessons learned in developing preparations for the major disasters of the future.

In addition to strengthening the disaster prevention system, improving awareness of disaster prevention at a community level is also an important challenge. The strongest pillar of support when a natural disaster strikes is the ability of the community to withstand the disaster. It is essential that each and every member of a community understands the natural disaster risks faced by each region, and incorporates disaster preparation, self-help and cooperation into his or her routine behavior. For this reason, Japan encourages people to participate in disaster prevention education and training. During the Great East Japan Earthquake, the regular evacuation training of

students at elementary schools in one of the affected regions helped all of the students to evacuate in time, something that has come to be known as the Kamaishi Miracle. Numerous volunteers went to the aid of the stricken regions, but it is also important for companies to formulate business continuity plans to limit the impact of disasters on the economy.

In this way, each time a major disaster has occurred in Japan it has succeeded in strengthening its disaster prevention systems, and at the same time achieved economic development and secure livelihoods for the Japanese people. Through its experience that growth is not possible without disaster prevention measures, Japan offers invaluable lessons to countries threatened by similar natural disasters. In other words, natural disasters are a major impediment to sustainable development, and ignoring the situation simply leads to this threat becoming an even greater impediment in the future. It is essential that every conceivable policy for sustainable development incorporates the perspective of disaster prevention so that a disaster-resilient society can be built.

Lastly, I would like to emphasize the fact that disasters do not respect national borders. I have heard about the great damage caused by drought and flooding in

Uganda in recent years, and there is a need for regions with experiences of similar disasters to share knowledge and technology, and to broaden partnerships.

Emergency support from the international community is also an important challenge when a major disaster strikes. During the Great East Japan Earthquake, the stricken regions received support from around the world. The generous support and message of solidarity given by the international community gave courage, not only to the disaster victims, but to the whole nation.

People are equal before nature, and there is a need for us to broaden the cooperation of international society in order to protect lives from the threat of our unpredictable natural environment. In 2005, I led the Japanese government delegation and acted as chairman at the Second United Nations World Conference on Disaster Reduction, where the Hyogo Framework for Action was adopted as a signpost to global disaster prevention.

The Japanese government has declared that it is ready to act as host for the Third United Nations World Conference on Disaster Reduction. Reductions in disaster damage have been achieved as a result of cumulative efforts based on the Hyogo Framework for Action, and I would implore you all once again to put disaster

prevention into action so that we are able to report on many excellent case studies, including lessons learned from Japan, when the third conference is held.

(Thank you for listening.)