

**Opening remarks by Mr. Kentaro Sonoura, State Minister for Foreign Affairs
in the meeting with Ambassadors of ASEAN Countries**

(Opening)

- Your Excellencies, Ambassadors of ASEAN countries,
- I am Kentaro Sonoura, State Minister for Foreign Affairs.
- Taking the opportunity of the third anniversary of the ASEAN-Japan Commemorative Summit Meeting, I am honored to meet with Your Excellencies today to ask for your cooperation to further enhance our cultural exchange.
- When I reflect on my experience of traveling to a cumulative total of 68 countries as Parliamentary Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs two years ago and currently as State Minister for Foreign Affairs, I come to the conviction that ASEAN is an engine of the world economy. ASEAN also plays a central role in regional political frameworks such as EAS and ARF.
- Japan will fully support efforts of ASEAN, which shares common values including the rule of law and democracy, to deepen and strengthen its integration for regional peace and prosperity. Japan will also work together with ASEAN for its economic integration through TPP and RCEP.

(WA Project)

- I have to note the importance of cultural and people-to-people exchange in terms of enhancing the relationship between Japan and ASEAN. Today, I would like to deepen your understanding of the WA Project once again, and seek for your support.
- This project was launched by Prime Minister Abe at the ASEAN-Japan Commemorative Summit Meeting. This initiative was motivated by the conviction that Asia should demonstrate an even greater ability by mutually accepting and learning our indigenous culture and tradition.
- Since then, the Japan Foundation Asia Center has played a central role in implementing this project, centering on two pillars: "Nihongo Partners" Program and Arts and Cultural Exchange Program.

(Nihongo Partners)

- Nihongo Partners are working as teaching assistants in Japanese language classes at institutions including high schools in your countries, and also engaging in interactions with local people through cultural activities.

- In ASEAN countries, more than one million students are studying the Japanese language. We have received voices from local schools saying that the students got an opportunity to speak with native Japanese people and experience Japanese culture, thanks to these Partners.
- These Partners return home after their mission as a huge fan of your countries. I joined an alumni reunion of the Partners in Tokyo last year. They keep in touch with the local people they have met during their mission, thus representing the vision of “Bunka no Wa”, a circle of culture.
- Now, I would like to show you a video message from local students to their Partners.
- Japan has sent 548 Partners so far, and aims to make this number more than 3,000 by 2020.

(Arts and Cultural Exchange Program)

- In the Arts and Cultural Exchange Program, we are implementing programs to promote collaboration between Asia and Japan in various fields including arts, film, music, dance, performing arts and sport.
- For example, in order to help develop soccer in Southeast Asia and promote youth exchange, we sponsored an exchange program involving more than 500 people and sent Japanese to teach in local soccer schools of ASEAN countries for more than one thousand children in collaboration with J League.

(Conclusion)

- The ASEAN Advisory Committee members of the Japan Foundation Asia Center value this Project so highly that they issued a joint statement.
- I expect Your Excellencies to cooperate with us in facilitating this program, including through the smooth issuing of visas.
- I ask Your Excellencies to convey the significance of this program to your governments once again. I would like to seek your assistance in making this program better understood in your home countries so that this program will contribute to a further enhanced relationship between Japan and ASEAN countries.
- Thank you.

(END)