

Keynote speech by State Secretary for Foreign Affairs

Mr. Ito

On the Occasion of the Africa Day Symposium

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Ambassadors, Ladies and Gentlemen

I am truly honored to be invited to this Africa Day Symposium. This year's theme - Africa's Food Situation: from Crisis to Opportunities, New Perspectives for Africa -, is particularly timely, since food security is an urgent challenge for today's Africa.

The rising food prices have hit the poor hardest. For example, the price of teff, which is the mainstay of the diet of the Ethiopians doubled within a year. In Uganda, the price of matooke, banana for cooking, is also twice as high as it was a year ago. The rising food prices itself causes a humanitarian crisis because it reduces calorie intake of the poor. Furthermore, in countries such as Burkina Faso and Cote d'Ivoire, the rising food prices resulted in violent demonstrations and political unrest. In Mauritania, the higher food prices and the inadequate response of the government are said to be among the major causes for the coups last month. If this situation continues, it might reverse the recent positive trend toward the consolidation of peace in Africa when the continent is finally about to get out of the turbulent period of the 1990s.

Let us recall one of the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) is eradication of extreme poverty and hunger. Although the international community promised to "reduce by half the proportion of people who suffer from hunger and the proportion of people living on less than a dollar a day by 2015," the Sub-Saharan Africa still faces severe difficulties; two hundred million people are said to be suffering from hunger due to high prices of food. The ratio of malnutrition remains very high. As this year marks the midpoint towards achieving MDGs by 2015, our will to achieve these goals is now at issue.

Japan takes the situation seriously. Japan believes cooperation in the agricultural sector is important in reducing poverty, and actively tackles the global challenge of rising food price. We are taking essential short-term measures such as delivering food aid without delay for countries in need. As the food shortage is caused by structural reasons, we also strengthen medium- to long-term assistance to enhance Africa's ownership to improve agricultural productivity.

Since this January, Japan has either disbursed or pledged 11 billion US dollars worth of assistance for food and the agricultural sector. We also highlighted this issue at the two major international conferences we have recently chaired.

One of them is TICAD IV held in Yokohama in May with the participation of 51 African countries. At this conference, Japanese Prime Minister put out a call for action aiming to double the current rice production output in African countries over the next 10 years. Japan is willing to cooperate with various countries and international organizations in the area of developing irrigation systems, improving the varieties of crops, and building capacities in the field of agriculture. We will be working with other countries and institutions to help implement the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Program (CAADP).

At the G8 Hokkaido Toyako Summit held in July, the G8 leaders showed a strong commitment to address the issue of food security in the "Statement on Global Food Security." In this statement, the leaders promised to continue to provide emergency support for the people suffering from food insecurity or hunger and to take medium- to long-term measures such as increasing aid and investment in the agricultural sector. The G8 leaders also called for the removal of export restrictions and the acceleration of the development and commercialization of second-generation biofuels made from non-food materials.

The entire international community should be united and take comprehensive and coherent measures to address rising food prices. A number of international organizations are tackling various aspects of rising food prices. It is essential to further coordinate their efforts to produce best results. In relation to this, I would like to add that trade in agriculture needs careful considerations.

Multilateral functions of agriculture should not be overlooked. We should tackle this issue in a comprehensive manner.

It is true that the rising food prices presented enormous challenges for Africa. I would like to close my speech by pointing out that it can also create great opportunities. In Africa, about 70% of the population works in the agricultural sector. I believe that if Africa can successfully raise its agricultural productivity, add value to its product, and sell it to market, Africa can turn this challenge into an opportunity. I would like to request African countries to strengthen their ownership to enhance agricultural productivity and expand their production. Japan stands ready to support such African efforts using various measures at its disposal.

Thank you for your attention.