

Welcome Remarks

Presented by His Excellency YAMAGAMI Shingo, Ambassador of Japan to Australia

On the occasion of the reception marking the 10th anniversary of the Great East Japan Earthquake

Thursday 15 April 2021

Ambassador's Official Residence, Canberra

Former Ambassador of Australia to Japan, Mr Murray McLean

Former Chief of the Australian Defence Force, Air Chief Marshal Mark Binskin

Mr Paul Baxter, Commissioner, Fire and Rescue New South Wales

Mr Robert McNeil, Assistant Commissioner, Fire and Rescue New South Wales

Ladies and gentlemen

I would like to begin by thanking you all for joining me this evening.

Today we gather to mark the 10th anniversary of the Great East Japan Earthquake.

The images of this disaster and the enormous devastation it left behind are just as shocking today as they were a decade ago.

And many people still suffer from the aftermath.

Despite all the pain and sorrow that resonates with March 11, this date is also a symbol of the power of international solidarity and camaraderie.

Offers of assistance from the international community in the aftermath of the disaster were quick.

But Australia's response was astonishingly swift.

In the early hours of March 14, less than 3 days after the disaster, assistance from Australia arrived at the Yokota Air Base in Tokyo.

This much-needed assistance came from the Australian Defence Force, Emergency Management Australia, NSW Police, Fire and Ambulance Service together with ACT fire fighters and search and rescue dog handlers from Queensland.

A 76-member Urban Search and Rescue team were dispatched together with DFAT and Australian Embassy staff to search for survivors in Minami Sanriku.

A coastal town hit by a 15.9 metre high tsunami which was already enduring a snowy, cold winter with below zero conditions in addition to frequent aftershocks.

Royal Australian Air Force C-17 heavy transport aircrafts transported food, water, supplies, and personnel around Japan.

As well as specialised equipment to help bring the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant under control.

Then-Prime Minister Julia Gillard was the very first foreign leader to visit some of the hardest hit areas in Tohoku in April 2011.

Her Japanese counterpart at the time, former Prime Minister Kan Naoto described her visit as “more powerful than words”.

Ms Gillard gifted Japan the helmet of the leader of the search and rescue team, Mr Robert McNeil who has kindly joined us this evening.

This helmet, worn by an Australian helping Japan in its most vulnerable moment serves as a symbol of where it has been and what it has done.

And in a true testament to the unwavering bonds between our people, many Australian businesses and individuals, both here and in Japan, as well as volunteer groups have offered their continued support ever since the disaster.

Such as the Tohoku Youth Program, ANU Za Kabuki, the various projects funded by the Australia-Japan Foundation, Koala House built by ANZ in Minami Sanriku and blankets given to children by knitting clubs in Canberra, just to name a few.

Japan and Australia have more in common than you think.

Both our countries have a long history of showing strength and solidarity in the face of natural disasters.

We share a stoic resilience in the face of adversity and an eagerness to stand ready and support each other.

When Australia faced the catastrophic Black Summer bushfires of 2019-2020, Japan dispatched two JASDF C-130 Hercules transport aircraft to assist with the disaster response.

This mission was a first for many reasons, not least of which because it marked the first time Japan’s Self Defence Force had been involved in responding to wildfires abroad.

We always remember where we were and what we were doing when momentous events occur.

But we also remember the helping hands extended to us in our hour of need.

Japan will never forget what Australia has done for us.

In the worst of times, you often see the best in people.

These people came to our aid in March 2011. And I am truly honoured to meet these very people this evening.

And so, I would like to raise a glass to these brave men and women of Australia.

On behalf of the people and government of Japan, I thank you from the very bottom of my heart.

Thank you.