FOSIM QUARTERLY

Celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Maldives and Japan
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QUOTE

On this momentous occasion of the Golden Jubilee of the establishment of Diplomatic Relations between the Maldives and Japan, it gives me great pleasure to extend warm felicitations and sincere well wishes to His Majesty the Emperor Akihito, His Excellency the Prime Minister Shinzō Abe, the Government and the friendly people of Japan.

I note with special gratitude that, since the establishment of diplomatic relations between the Maldives and Japan, on the 14th of November, 1967, Japan has been a prominent partner in the socio-economic development of the Maldives. The close and friendly bilateral relations that exist between the Maldives and Japan are based on mutual respect and understanding, and the relations have further grown stronger ever since.

Japan has been among the first and most generous sources of assistance in times of national need in the Maldives, including the rehabilitation, recovery and reconstruction efforts in the immediate aftermath of the 2004 Asian Tsunami. The assistance and support of Japan, towards infrastructure development and capacity building in the Maldives, contributed to steady growth and the subsequent graduation of the country from Least Developed Country status in 2011.

I would also like to recall that, throughout our close ties and cooperation over the past five decades, Japan has extended support to the Maldives in developing the fisheries sector, modernizing the information communication technology infrastructure, enhancing disaster-resilience, mitigation against climate change, empowering the youth and promoting
education among other numerous assistance extended.

From the onset of tourism in the 1970s, Japan has been a main tourism source market for the Maldives, with around forty thousand Japanese tourists visiting the Maldives annually in recent years. Trade between the two countries has also remained strong throughout the years.

I also remain confident that the strong ties of friendship between our two countries will be fortified in the years to come, and look forward to further enhancing cooperation between our two Governments and peoples. I wish continued peace, progress and prosperity for the friendly people of Japan.

UNQUOTE
It is a great honor for me to express my warm felicitations and sincere best wishes to His Majesty the Emperor of Japan, His Excellency Shinzō Abe, Prime Minister of Japan, His Excellency Tarō Kōno, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Japan and the government and friendly people of Japan on this momentous occasion of the 50th anniversary of the establishment of the diplomatic relations between the Maldives and Japan.

On 16 November 1967, the Maldives and Japan signed an agreement to formally establish diplomatic relations. Since then, the relations between the Maldives and Japan have grown from strength to strength. Our two countries share a warm relationship underpinned by common interests and close cooperation across a broad spectrum of areas.

I am also pleased to take note of His Excellency President Abdulla Yameen Abdul Gayoom’s official visit to Japan in April 2014, which has given new impetus to further broaden and deepen the areas of cooperation between the two countries.

Japan has been a true and well-respected friend, who has always stood by us during times of need. Our two countries enjoy a longstanding close relations including excellent people-to-people ties. The development assistance we have received from the friendly people of Japan has contributed immensely to the socio-economic development of Maldives. From human resources development to environmental protection, sustainable fisheries to modern day communications and transport, electrification, health sector development as well as humanitarian and reconstruction assistance in the aftermath of the Asian Tsunami in 2004.
Japanese assistance has virtually reached all four corners of the Maldivian archipelago.

On this commemorative Golden Jubilee, I wish to convey our deep appreciation to the Government and the friendly people of Japan for the continued assistance and support provided to the development of Maldives.

I am confident that, in the coming years, the Maldives and Japan will dramatically expand ties of friendship. I have no doubt that the trade relations between our two countries will further strengthen and expand, and I look forward for the tourist visitors from Japan to continue to increase, and for the further enhancement of the people-to-people exchanges.

In conclusion, I should offer my great respects to the people of both Maldives and Japan who have exerted themselves to foster the significant friendship between the two countries for half a century and I sincerely wish for further development of the existing amicable relations in dialogue and partnership. I also convey my best wishes for continued peace, prosperity and progress of the people of Japan.
It is a great honour for me to extend my heart-felt congratulations on the occasion of publication of the FOSIM Quarterly special edition 2, which is devoted to the history and future prospects of Maldives–Japan relationship.

On 14 November 2017, we commemorate the 50th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Japan and the Republic of Maldives. As we planned and organized various programs marking this auspicious year, I am pleased to state that this publication is one of the most outstanding expressions of appreciation of our cordial relations, shown by the Government of Maldives and the Foreign Service staff of the esteemed Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Maldives.

The ability to communicate in an atmosphere of mutual respect across barriers of custom and language is of crucial importance to all of us today. We shall devote ourselves to the furtherance of the work which has already been carried out so far since the days of the establishment of diplomatic relations and gained momentum after the Embassy of Maldives in Tokyo was opened in 2007 and the Embassy of Japan in Malé was opened in 2016.

From our joint efforts on the international fora to our close economic and cultural ties through people-to-people exchange and promotion of tourism, we have a great deal to celebrate about the future of our friendship. I look forward to deepening and advancing our bilateral relationship.
On the momentous occasion of the golden jubilee of diplomatic relations between Japan and the Maldives, it is my honour and pleasure to convey warm greetings to His Majesty the Emperor of Japan, His Excellency Shinzō Abe, Prime Minister of Japan, His Excellency Tarō Kōno, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Japan and the government and friendly people of Japan. May I also convey good wishes to His Excellency Abdulla Yameen Abdul Gayoom, President of the Republic of Maldives, His Excellency Dr. Mohamed Asim, Minister of Foreign Affairs and the government of Maldives, on this historic milestone.

As the third and most recent Ambassador of the Maldives to Japan, it is with a deep sense of satisfaction and pride that I note the strong bonds of friendship, trust and cooperation that exist between the two countries. Japan-Maldives relations transcend diplomatic boundaries, and are cemented on long-standing people-to-people relations.

There is no country that rivalled Japan in the sheer scale of assistance offered to the Maldives in our post-Independent history, particularly in our growth towards graduation from Least Developed Country status. Japan also continues to feature among the top source markets for tourism in the Maldives. The two countries have long shared common platforms and stands on issues of global significance, and have forged strong alliances in the multilateral arena.

Today, the two capitals boast full-fledged Embassies geared towards coordinating and collaborating bilateral ties. Japan continues to display a keen interest in investing in large-scale development projects in the Maldives. Trade between the two countries, driven by fresh
and processed tuna from the Maldives to Japan, and automobiles and technologically-advances products from Japan to the Maldives, have displayed a sustained upward trend.

Cultural ties and voluntarism too have played a pivotal role in bringing the two countries together. The contributions by JOCV volunteers in the development of the Maldives cannot be overstated. They continue to be ambassadors in promoting Japan-Maldives ties.

Japan has always been a true friend of the Maldives, ever willing to support and assist the Maldives in times of national need, including the tsunami. Similarly, at times of national emergency in Japan, such as the Great Eastern Earthquake and Tsunami in Japan, the people of the Maldives were united in relaying their concern to and solidarity with their Japanese friends.

In my brief but productive and enlightening tenure as the Ambassador of Maldives in Japan, I developed strong bonds of friendship and a sense of deep respect and admiration for the great country. Among my fondest memories are the audiences with Their Majesties, the breathtaking beauty of the country and industry of the friendly people.

I am confident that relations between the two countries will continue to develop further in the time ahead, and assure colleagues and counterparts of my firm personal commitment towards advancing ties between Japan and the Maldives.

Arigatō Gozaimashita and Wassalaamu Alaikum!
Message by Secretary, Bilateral & Former Ambassador of the Republic of Maldives to Japan
Mr. Ahmed Khaleel

As the Maldives and Japan celebrate the Golden Jubilee of the establishment of diplomatic ties, I take this opportunity to convey my sincere and heartfelt congratulations to the government and people of Japan.

I am grateful to have had the opportunity to play a role, however modest it maybe, in fostering relations between the two countries.

My involvement with Japan began in 1988 in my capacity as the Desk Officer handling the Japanese Official Development Assistance (ODA) program to the Maldives, a time when the Japanese assistance to the country was at its peak. In 1993 I travelled to Japan to participate in the Japanese language training program. A decade later, in 2006, I was posted in Japan entrusted with the task of setting up the Maldives Embassy in Tokyo. Since then, I have been involved in Maldives relations with Japan in one form or another, including serving as the Maldives Ambassador to Japan from December 2009 to October 2016.

During my tenure as the Ambassador, I had the opportunity to witness and enjoy the exceptionally gracious and warm hospitality of the Japanese people. I will always cherish and treasure the memories of Japan and will always work tirelessly to promote and strengthen even closer relations between the two countries, in the years to come.

Long live Maldives-Japan friendship!
President Abdulla Yameen’s Official Visit to Japan from April 14 to 17 2014

His Excellency President Abdulla Yameen Abdul Gayoom called on His Majesty Emperor Akihito, during his Official Visit to Japan from 14 to 17 April 2014.

President Abdulla Yameen Abdul Gayoom and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe entering the Japan-Maldives Summit Meeting in Tokyo during the President’s Official Visit to Japan from 14 to 17 April 2014.
President Abdulla Yameen Abdul Gayoom and Prime Minister Shinzo Abe pose for their Official Photograph before their Summit Meeting in Tokyo on April 15, 2014, during the President’s Official Visit to Japan from 14 to 17 April 2014.

President Abdulla Yameen Abdul Gayoom and Prime Minister Shinzo Abe signing the Official Joint Communique after their Summit Meeting in Tokyo during the President’s Official Visit to Japan from 14 to 17 April 2014.

President Abdulla Yameen Abdul Gayoom and Prime Minister Shinzo Abe exchange the signed Joint Communique at the signing ceremony in Tokyo during the President’s Official Visit to Japan from 14 to 17 April 2014.
Bilateral Summit Meeting between President Abdulla Yameen Abdul Gayoom and Prime Minister Shinzo Abe during the President’s Official Visit to Japan from 14 to 17 April 2014.

President Abdulla Yameen Abdul Gayoom and Prime Minister Shinzo Abe exchange jerseys of national football teams of the two countries after their Summit in Tokyo, during the President’s Official Visit to Japan from 14 to 17 April 2014.
Prime Minister Sinzo Abe presenting a soccer ball to President Yameed Abdul Gayoom representing the donation by the Japan Football Association (JFA) 100 soccer balls to the Maldives as a symbol of cooperation in the field of sports, during the President’s Official Visit to Japan from 14 to 17 April 2014.

President Abdulla Yameen Abdul Gayoom and His Majesty Emperor Akihito shake hands after their meeting at the Imperial Palace in Tokyo on 15 April 2014 during the Official Visit of President Yameen to Japan from 14 to 17 April 2014.

President Abdulla Yameen Abdul Gayoom meets the Chairman and CEO of Japan External Trade Organization (JETRO) Mr. Hiroyuki Ishige in Tokyo, during the President’s Official Visit to Japan from 14 to 17 April 2014.
On this historic occasion that marks 50 years of diplomatic relations with Japan, I convey greetings and best wishes to the Ministers and the staff of the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of Maldives and Japan, and by extension to the Governments and the people of both countries. I am delighted that I have the opportunity to share some of my own reflections on my time in Tokyo as the first Ambassador of Maldives to Japan.

I do, indeed, carry with me fond memories of my tenure in Tokyo. Memories of my days in Tokyo are filled with a number of unforgettable courtesies extended to me by the Japanese people, both in my professional life and personal sphere of activities. I remain deeply touched by those courtesies that have made lasting impressions, a lifelong one, on the characteristic nature of the kindness, helpfulness and friendliness of the Japanese people. Reflecting back, the strong sincerity behind these attributes are palpable even today. As time went by, I realized

On a Saturday that my wife and I were passing through the Shinjuku Station in Tokyo to visit a friend when for a minute or two we felt confused and lost in the world’s busiest train station. I had never used the station before. However, our confusion did not last long. A young Japanese girl surely read into the expression on our face. Seemingly, she was in a hurry but approached us and asked us if we needed any help. Not only did she give us the direction to our platform but also escorted us to our connecting train, all the while holding the hand of my wife as we walked with her. She then seated us in the train, smiled at us and left even before we could adequately thank her.

Courtesy of the Japanese people

It was towards noon

Mr. Abdul Hameed Zakariyya,
First Ambassador of Maldives to Japan
the true extent of how these courtesies were deeply rooted in the Japanese culture.

**The work of the Mission**

Let me recall briefly the context within which the Maldives Mission was established in Tokyo. As an LDC, the Maldives had received substantial development assistance from Japan and much of it went into infrastructure development and the rest to other areas that badly needed support. The abundant generosity by the Japanese, over a long period had left the Maldives in a state of deep gratitude to the Government and the people of Japan and with a strong inclination to continue working with Japan, more closely on areas of mutual interest.

I knew the role expected of me and the responsibilities entrusted to me when I arrived in Tokyo in February 2007 to take up residence there as the first Ambassador of Maldives to Japan. By then, the Chancery had been established. The work of the Mission was well in progress, having been designed flawlessly by one of our veteran diplomats.

Admittedly, although our Mission was small, it symbolized the strong and vibrant relationship shared between the two countries. Moreover, it reflected our desire to further strengthen the bilateral ties with Japan based on shared ideals, principles and positions. Similarly, it represented our enthusiasm to work together to promote international peace and security and to advance our common interests through close and frequent consultations on global issues at various international fora.

**Relationship with the Gaimusho and others**

The goals of the Mission have been to enhance dialogue with its counterpart and forge professional relationships with the pertinent officials at the Gaimusho, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. As is the diplomatic practice, it was our primary point of contact.

There were also other doors on which I had to tap more regularly and gently. Japan was a market for our tuna and tourism, the two key industries at home. In addition to other tasks, there was much work to be carried out to promote people-to-people contact and foster inter-parliamentary relations between two countries.

**A joyful experience with fond memories**

Regardless of the multi-dimensional nature of my responsibilities, my professional experiences were as pleasing as those on personal life. I remain deeply impressed by the close and cordial relationship the Gaimusho maintains with the diplomatic community. The easy and unconstrained access
to my counterparts at the working level, their cooperative and friendly disposition meant that all matters communicated to them, were given utmost attention and fitting priority.

It was a real joy to work in a climate of cooperation and trust. I carry unforgettable experiences and sweet memories of my time in Tokyo.

**Future of the Maldives-Japan relationship**

Today, as the Maldives and Japan have an embassy in each other’s capital, the setting is ripe today to further enhance the climate of constructive cooperation. Undoubtedly, based on the historic 50 years of mutual trust, respect and cooperation, there is strong potential for relations Maldives-Japan relations to further grow and prosper in the years to come.

It is my sincere wish to see constant and continued enhancement in the bilateral relations, uninterrupted by any distractions, between the Maldives and Japan.

Long live the Maldives-Japan relationship!
Diplomatic relations between the Maldives and Japan was established on 14 November 1967. However, interactions between the two countries can be traced back for centuries. For instance, according to the history of “Katsuobushi” (Dried Bonito — Hiki Kandu Mas), Katsuobushi originated in the Maldives in the late 14th Century and was first introduced to Japan from the Maldives in the early 15th Century. At present, Katsuobushi plays an important role in the diet of both countries, especially so as an essential ingredient in Japanese cooking.

Since the mid-1980s, Japan has been one of the leading bilateral development partners of the Maldives. From human resource development; environmental protection; sustainable fisheries; communications; and humanitarian and reconstruction assistance in the aftermath of the Indian Ocean tsunami in 2004, Japanese assistance virtually transcends to all corners of the Maldivian archipelago. Suffice it to say that there will be no single Maldivian who has not, either directly or indirectly, benefited from the assistance provided by Japan, over the past five decades.

Japan’s Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) program to the Maldives has contributed immensely to the socio-economic development of the country. The program includes, grant aid including food aid, loan aid and technical cooperation. Japan’s ODA program to the Maldives surely represents a perfect example of how effective ODA can be, for small Island developing states like the Maldives in its socio-economic development.

Relations between the two countries reached new heights with the official visit of H.E. Mr. Abdulla Yameen Abdul
Gayoom, President of the Maldives, to Japan in April 2014, the first time for a Maldivian Head of State to make an official visit to Japan on the official invitation of the Government of Japan. During the visit, the two countries agreed to further expand and accelerate their cooperation based on over forty years of friendship and trust.

The two countries have also been working closely in the international arena on important international issues such as peace and security, climate change, human security and in the promotion and protection of human rights throughout the world. The Maldives was one of the very first countries to publicly announce its unreserved and unconditional support for Japan’s bid to become a Permanent Member of the United Nations Security Council.

Over the years, people-to-people contact, as well as trade and commercial relations between the two countries have also grown steadily. In particular, the opening of the Embassy of the Maldives in Tokyo in 2007 has enabled the Maldives to extend...
its outreach to the Japanese people in a more meaningful and mutually productive manner.

The signing of the agreement between the two countries under Japan’s Bilateral Offset Credit Mechanism (BOCM), now known as the Joint Crediting Mechanism (JCM), aimed at achieving low carbon growth between Japan and the Maldives in 2013, as well as the first Investment Forum of the Maldives held in Tokyo, during the official visit of President Yameen to Japan last year, has definitely opened up new avenues for cooperation and paved the way for partnership between the private sectors of the two countries.

Under Technical Cooperation and various other programmes of the Government of Japan, a large number of students, youth and community leaders, as well as public and private sector officials have had the opportunity to visit and explore Japan. Since 1981, nearly a thousand Maldivians have attained specialized training under various JICA led training programmes. In addition, over the years, the people of the Maldives have had the pleasure of availing the services of several hundred highly qualified and dedicated Japanese volunteers from the Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers (JOCV).

Undoubtedly, JOCV volunteers are continuing to play a crucial role in promoting and bridging relations between the two countries. Ever since the establishment of JOCV Maldives Office in 1981, several volunteers, in the fields of physical education, swimming, mathematics, science and agricultural farming, served in different islands across the nation.

The Maldives is considered as one of the most favorite travel destinations for the young Japanese, especially for honeymooners and scuba divers. Nearly 40 thousand tourists from Japan visit the Maldives annually.

In their heart of hearts, the Maldivian people have a special place for Japan. Indeed, Japan has proved to be a
“True Friend” and has always been there for the Maldives during times of need. Just to name a few, during the early seventies when Maldives was struggling to find new markets for its only export product “Hiki Kadu Mas (Katsuobushi),” it was Japan which came to its rescue. In 1974 Japan helped mechanize the Maldivian fishing vessels, and established a tuna canning factory, thus revolutionizing the fishing as well as the transportation industry. When the Maldives made its plea for help in 1987, at the United Nations for protection from rising sea-levels due to global warming, Japan was the first country to extend a helping hand in a meaningful manner. The seawall and the coastal protection constructed with the help of Japanese ODA saved the capital Male’ during the Asian Tsunami in 2004.

When the Maldives was working to establish its telecommunications with the world, it was again Japan that came to our aid. The modern telecommunications network and the television broadcasting station established with the help of Japan in 1976 linked the Maldives with the rest of the world and paved way for its people to enjoy the ICT innovations of today. Currently, a state-of-the-art, high quality digital television broadcasting project to introduce the Japanese Integrated Services Digital Broadcasting Terrestrial (ISDB-T) system to cover the entire Maldivian archipelago is underway. This is a project that was agreed during the historic visit of President Yameen to Japan in 2014. When finished, this project will give our people the chance to enjoy the latest and the highest quality of digital broadcasting available in the world.

With the several schools and the Youth Center donated by Japan, the efforts of the government to develop human resources, especially amongst the youth, got a tremendous boost. Not to mention that the clean energy projects funded by Japan, as well as accepting the Maldives as a Joint Crediting Mechanism (JCM) partner by Japan, has eased the government’s efforts to mitigate against climate change and achieve sustainable energy efficiency. Last, but not the least, the comprehensive tsunami reconstruction project funded by Japan after the 2004 Tsunami brought home, a new meaning to the concept of “safe islands” and have enhanced resilience of the islands from such natural disasters and climate change.

The opening of a resident mission of Japan in Male’ in 2016 has further cemented our relations. As we celebrate the Golden Jubilee of relations, the signs of a more strategic partnership between the two countries are finally starting to take shape.
Since the establishment of diplomatic relations between the Maldives and Japan in 1967, Japan and its people have always been close to the hearts of the people of the Maldives.

The Maldives-Japan has been enjoying a strong bond of friendship for decades. As we celebrate the golden jubilee of its relationship with Japan, the Maldives enthusiastically recall the significant assistance provided to the development of many areas such as education, telecommunication, health, human resource development, environment, harbours etc.

Japan has been one of the most important development partners for the Maldives. At this important juncture, one could not forget the contributions by Japan for the introduction of modern day educational facilities to the Maldives. In the early 1980s, Japan and its people contributed in alleviating the facilities for providing education in the outer atolls to a new level. It was a dream come true to many of the people living in the outer atolls, accessing education through a very minimum level of infrastructure. Japan contributed in the construction of 15 primary schools in the island of the Maldives, under four different phases. Even today, people who benefited from these projects values and recognizes Japan’s contribution in the development of their schools.

In late 1980s, with the increasing demand for education in the capital Male’, especially at primary level, Japan’s decision in the construction of a primary school with modern day education facilities is yet another milestone in the development of the education sector in the Maldives. Japan constructed its first full-fledged primary school in Male’ Island under its generous grant assistance.
to the Maldives in 1988. As such “Kalaafaanu School” is still, one of the most popular schools in the capital.

In 1998, Japan came to assistance in granting another primary school to the Maldives. Constructed in Male’, Ghiyasuddin School was another huge achievement in meeting the increasing student population in the capital city. With modern infrastructure and facilities, this school again, became a visible symbol of the strong bonds of friendship between the Maldives and Japan.

The re-construction of Thaajudeen School, in 2002 was another major project implemented under the Grant assistance from Japan to the Maldives. The old building of Thaajudeen School, was found to be insecure for students to study due to its condition and hence the old building was demolished. The Project was completed in 2004 with modern facilities to cater a demand for over a population of thousand students.

The Government of Maldives approached Japan for the construction and furnishing of a school to expand the provision of secondary education for girls living in the Maldives and alleviating the over-crowding experience in only girl’s school; Aminiya School in Male’. In 2007, the Government of Japan confirmed its commitment to the construction and furnishing of a secondary school for girls. Catering for students of secondary education, the school was opened in 2009 as the second girls school in Male’.

While Japan continues to contribute to the development of infrastructure in the Maldives, Japan also contributed to the development of human resources in the Maldives. With its technical assistance programmes and training opportunities under Japan International Cooperation Agency, a large number of Maldives had the opportunity to transfer knowledge, technology and people to people contact through these programmes. The Maldives continues to benefit from these programmes even today.

The Government and the people of Maldives remains thankful to the Government and people of Japan for its continued cooperation and assistance to the socio-economic development of Maldives. May the flowers bloom and cherries blossom in the garden of friendship between the Maldives and Japan for the years to come.
Japanese assistance to the Maldives in the form of investments in the construction of schools; Hiriya School was open on 14 June 2009.

Japanese assistance to the Maldives in the form of investments in the construction of schools; Ghiyashudheen School began operating in February, 1999.

Japanese assistance to the Maldives in the form of investments in the construction of schools; Thajudheen School celebrates 27th anniversary- the school was open on 7th February 1989.
Japanese assistance to the Maldives in the form of investments in the construction of schools; Kalafaanu School was open on 25th of July 1989
Elementary Schools in the Islands were constructed with the assistance of the Japanese Government
As we celebrate half a century of diplomatic ties between Maldives and Japan this year, it is indeed timely to recognize the Japanese contribution to the development of Fisheries Sector in Maldives. It is not an easy task to cover all the contributions to the fisheries sector during the last fifty years. Maldives and Japan has some common characteristics, when the fisheries industry is taken into account. Both are fishing nations and practice pole and line for tuna fishing using live bait and fisheries play an important role in food security in Japan and being a primary
industry in coastal areas, contribute significantly to regional economies. Being distributed countrywide, fishing communities make a vital contribution to the preservation of local traditional culture in the form of fish-eating habits, festivals, customs and manners.

Japan and Maldives have a long history in fishing. Japanese fishermen use the bow of the boat while engaged in pole and line fishing and Maldivians used the stern side as a platform to catch tuna. Both Japan and Maldives are among the world’s highest consumers of tuna and tuna products. The Japanese “Katsuobushi” family and the Maldivian products which are boiled, smoked and sun-dried “Valhoamas and Hikimas” are similar in their processing and all products are similar in taste.

Mechanisation of Fishing Vessels

Before 1970s, there were not many forms of fish processing practiced in the Maldives. Basically, there were two types of end products namely traditional smoked and dried tuna (Maldives Fish), and salted dried fish. When Sri Lanka cut back its imports of Maldivian fish products in the 1970, the Government of Maldives was forced to find an alternative mechanism to obtain foreign currency.

As a result, Japanese Marubeni cooperation became the first foreign company to purchase the country’s fish. In the early 1970s local catch increased considerably due to the mechanization of fishing vessels. As a result of the increased local catch, there was a greater need for product diversification and enhanced value added products, resulting in the establishment of a joint venture fish canning plant in the island of Felivaru in 1978. However, due to price fluctuations in international markets in early 1980’s, the Japanese company ceased its operation in Maldives. Thus, the government of Maldives purchased the facilities and upgraded it to continue the canning and freezing operation in Felivaru.

Japanese Government was the leading development partner to the mechanization of the Maldivian fishing vessels. Mechanisation of fishing boats were initiated in 1974 as a Japanese assistance. The first mechanized “masdhoani”, fishing vessel was launched on 10 December 1974, under the Japanese assistance. Between 1975 to 1977, more than 500 fishing vessels were mechanized and were carried out by a revolving fund of the Japanese Government and the Maldivian Government.

A project titled “Japan Aid 1990 – Mechanisation of additional fishing boats” was implemented upon signing an exchange of notes between both governments on 22 April 1991 and I was fortunate to work for
this project as a support staff of the Ministry of Fisheries and Agriculture. 100 Yanmar engines of 39Hp, pumps and other accessories were provided to the fishermen. This was provided to fishermen as a loan, under a legal agreement to pay back to the Ministry of Fisheries, and it was deposited to a revolving fund account.

Japan’s Marubeni Corporation and their subsidiary Hoko Fisheries took their places as the very first exporters of chilled fresh tuna from the Maldives back in 1970. “Hoko-Maldives” started collecting fish from the fishermen under an agreement signed Marubeni Corporation and the Government of Maldives.

In 1977, Hoko Suizan Marubeni Corporation started collecting fresh fish from the fishermen, which was targeted to the islands in the north of Maldives. They had a reasonable fleet which is suitable to collect and store their daily catch. Four mother vessels and four collector vessels were in operation. A lot of Maldivians were employed at a high pay, in their operations at sea. When they started, the collection capacity was 150 Metric tonnes per 24hrs of chilled fish and 1800 Metric Tonnes of freezing and storage capacity.

**Tuna Canning**
The Government of Maldives initiated dialogue with Suizan Kaisha Limited to get support for establishing a tuna cannery in Felivaru Island of Lahviyanai Atoll. On 3rd July 1977, a joint venture company named “Maldives Nippon Corporation” was established. The first fish cannery was also established in Maldives, under Japanese assistance. It was opened on 3rd February 1978. The freezing capacity of the Mother vessel of Nippon Corporation was 26 metric tonnes per day and the fish hold storage capacity of the vessel was 700 metric tonnes of fish. Felivaru

Fish canning include 300Mt of Frozen Storage, Tanks of 8 Mt capacity for chilling fish with ice for temporary storage, a power house which has 5 Generator sets of 180 KVA, a jetty and, one freezer vessel of 80 metric tonnes (Gross tonnage). The daily production capacity of the Felivaru cannery was 8 metric tonnes per day.

**Aquaculture / Mari-culture**
Although aquaculture exists as a well-established industry in other regions, the Maldivian aquaculture industry is in its infancy. The Government of Maldives has carried out pilot scale projects over the past decade on the aquaculture of pearl oysters.

In the years leading up to the 1990s residents of the islands of Vaavu Atoll were benefitting enormously from the trade of black coral. Eight years ago when the collection of black coral was banned, the people knew that they would be losing precious
income from the lucrative but endangered marine animal.

Nevertheless, at present, thanks to a unique undertaking supported by UNDP and the Government of Japan, Vaavu atoll residents have seen increased employment and earning possibilities instead. Two phases of the project were implemented, which started in Felidhoo of Vaavu Atoll and later on transferred to Bodumohoraa Island (MRC Research Station) of the same atoll.

The “Pearl Culture Demonstration and Marketing Project,” had introduced techniques of oyster culture and pearl culture on demonstration farms, along with pearl jewelry manufacturing and marketing. None of these had been tried in Maldives before. The second phase of the project was signed on 8th October 2003, with a funding of US $396,00. It was estimated to terminate in the first week of October 2008.

The venture, funded by the Japan Human Resource Development Fund and executed by the Marine Research Centre of Maldives, has today grown into a small-scale domestic industry, with the project’s two pearl culture rafts in commercial operation. Truly Maldivian souvenirs are not found in plenty in the souvenir shops. Although a lucrative industry once, environmental consciousness and the introduction of other cheaper alternatives such as importing has meant that people who are engaging in this industry has become fewer and fewer.

By targeting traditional craftspeople and jewelers, outer atoll inhabitants and businesspeople who sell souvenirs, the project aimed to increase the availability of these raw materials so that the 460,000 odd tourists who visit the Maldives’ every year can find more Maldivian-made souvenirs. The results of the first project have inspired even bigger thinking. Building on the solid relationships built between the community and MRC, the project is to expand, with support from the Government of Japan and UNDP.

By Depending heavily on tourism for a major part of its GDP, there is increasing pressure on the government to expand the narrow economic base given the volatility of the tourism industry. The second phase concentrated on creating stronger market links to the private sector, with a view to opening up marketing opportunities, both in the domestic and international markets.

“Sustainable Fisheries Development Plan of Important Sub-Sectors in the Maldives” (SFDPIS).

Recently the Japanese Government supported Maldives, for the
formulation of a “Sustainable Fisheries Development Plan of the Important Sub-Sectors in the Maldives” (SFDPIS). This is one of JICA’s technical cooperation projects. The SFDPIS was implemented in collaboration with the Ministry of Fisheries and Agriculture. The purpose of this project is to design the Master Plan of Fisheries Development to achieve sustainable fisheries resources use, with necessary technical developments and experimentation. The project followed the “Sub-sector approach”, with four sub-groups, they are the Oceanic fisheries, Reef fisheries, Aquaculture and Post-harvest, Value-addition.

Six pilot projects were conducted and their results were promising which is an encouragement for the Ministry of Fisheries and Agriculture and their staffs. Knowledge transfer trips were also arranged by JICA under the project, in order to get the best Japanese experience.

One of the most interesting pilot projects was the modification of a bait hold in a Maldivian Skipjack tuna fishing vessel, to the Japanese type of bait hold which they used in Japanese pole and line fishing vessels. This was done in order to improve the survival rate of live bait in the hold and it was proven that the survival rate of live bait has increased after the modification and it was very well accepted by the boat owner and crews of the fishing vessel “RASKURI”, Maradhoo of Addu Atoll. A working model of this type of bait hold was displayed to the public on FISHERIES EXPO 2015, an event to mark the national fishermen’s and farmer’s day in Male.

“Yake” is the phenomenon of deteriorating tuna meat (it looks like burned meat), which appears when the inner body temperature of tuna increases after strenuous movements during the catch. It happens frequently in high water temperature areas. The problem of Yake has been a critical issue in Maldives, for a long time, as fish with Yake commands very low prices or is even rejected by the processing companies.

The same problem previously occurred in Okinawa, Japan, under similar sea and environment conditions; the Irabu Fisheries Cooperative Association developed a method to prevent Yake named the “Irabu method”. This method is quite unique as compared to the traditional one: the fish is not killed after it is caught; it is directly put into cold water so that the inner body temperature of the fish cools down through natural gill respiration and blood circulation. Given the setting, in order to address the issue, an electric shocker was introduced to kill yellow fin tuna to reduce the shock during catch. Some fishing trials were conducted using
the Electric Shocker, followed by chilling using “IRABU” method. The yellow fin tuna were kept in modified insulated boxes which has a thicker insulation, compare to the existing insulated fish boxes used by Maldivian fishermen. This pilot project has demonstrated that by improving handling and better chilling, the quality of hand-line caught tuna can also be improved.

Another pilot project which focused on improving the safety, quality and shelf life of vacuum packed, Valhoamas (boiled, smoked and dried tuna) produced in the local market. More than 50 different brands of Valhoomas supplied to the domestic market were tested for its safety, quality and shelf-life. It was proven that by improving the packaging material and giving a heat treatment, after vacuum packaging to extend the safe shelf-life.

The most exciting pilot project conducted under the MASPLAN Project was the exploitation of Diamond Back Squid from Maldivian Waters. The Diamond Back Squid resource survey was implemented for two weeks in November 2016 and three weeks in February-March 2017, in the whole area of Maldives except for the southern part, and a total of 59 Diamond Back Squids were caught during the survey. This was the first official record of Diamond Back Squid catch in the Maldivian waters.

The deep-sea fish resource, the experimental fishing survey was implemented from February to March 2017, using only nautical and electronic charts to decide on the operation points because of the insufficient capacity of the available echo-sounder. Despite this limitation, 14 species of deep-sea fin-fishes such as groupers and snappers were caught during the 8 trips of the resource survey.

**JICA training**

A number of colleagues from the Ministry of Fisheries and Agriculture and had attended short term and long term training, fully funded by JICA in various aspects related to coastal fisheries, fishing technology, community planning and development for fisheries planning, mari-culture, fisheries research. Some key Government stakeholders were given placements, based on relevance of the training. This was greatly appreciated as capacity building in technical areas of fisheries has always been a challenge.

Before I conclude, I would like to thank the Japanese Government and its people for their generosity in contributing to the development of the fisheries sector of Maldives. Last but not least, I owe a debt of gratitude to the Maldives Embassy in Japan, Japanese Embassy in Maldives and JICA Maldives, as mediators for co-operation and assistance.
Japan’s Contribution to the Mechanization of Traditional Sailing Fishing Boats

A Revolutionary Transformation to Fisheries in the Maldives

Mr. Ali Rilwan,
Senior Desk Officer,
Ministry of Foreign Affairs

The mechanization of the traditional sailing fishing boats, Masdhoni in the early 1970s has been hailed as one of the most successful economic ventures in the Maldives. Amidst the complexities involved in trading fish with its partners, President Nasir sought a joint venture with the Japanese commercial partners for selling fresh fish from Maldivian fishermen and embarked on an ambitious project on upgrading and mechanization of the traditional fishing vessels, which resulted in the increase in efficiency and range of operations of fishing fleet, thus sustaining the livelihoods of the locals and boosting the country’s economy.

For centuries the people of the Maldives have been fishermen who owned fleets of traditional sailing vessels called Mas Dhoni[s]. These vessels are crafted and build using local materials such as coconut timber. Traditional boat builders work by the accuracy of the eye and the skill is passed down from generation to generation in the Maldives. The master builder works entirely from his memory and draw no design with distinct touch of perfection that has made it highly seaworthy. Evidently, the Maldivian traditional boat builders over the centuries would not have deviated much from the conventions but some changes in design did occur according to the needs of the users and progressive adaptations took place through newer technology. Traditional Maldivian boats with two distinctive features, triangular or lateen sail, and for its stitched construction can be classified in the category of Arab dhow.

The main method of fishing is pole & line and even today local fishermen continued to catch fish, ‘one by one’ using pole and line and hand line methods.
During the 1960s and 1970s the bulk of fish catch is tuna and fish products included dried, smoked, and salted fish was the main export. The dominant export to Sri Lanka was dried tuna popularly known as ‘Maldives Fish’. In 1971 Sri Lanka, the single export destination decided to stop its purchase of Maldivian fish, Maldives lost its only export. In its attempts to solve the ‘Maldives Fish crisis’, the Government sought new markets, inviting foreign companies to operate ‘fish-buying services’ to small-scale fishermen in the outer islands for exporting. Although, tuna and reef fish were intended to be the target species for export, the traditional sailing boats could not supply the fish, fast enough to meet with the requirements for international standards of freshness quality.

Given this, in 1973, the Government began to work on a US$100,000 UNDP funded pilot training project on mechanizing sailing fishing boats. The UNDP pilot project was characteristically slow and cumbersome due to the excessive bureaucratic red-tape of the UN inter-agency coordination. The pilot project and the mechanization of fishing vessels program made speedy progress only when the Government of Japan gifted 116 Yanmar
marine diesel inboard engines, an important trajectory which gave strong impetus to the mechanization of the fishing fleet in the Maldives.

The first traditional fishing boat especially built to install Yanmar marine diesel engine by the Ministry of Fisheries under the mechanization of traditional sailing fishing boats program was a Masdhoni, famously known as “Ummeedhu”. By 15 September 1974, the boat building and installation of the engine was complete and the Ummeedhu boat, loosely translated into ‘hope’, set sail to commence its first stage sea trials the next day. It was observed that the speed of the first ever mechanized Dhoni was nine nautical miles per hour and the haul of live bait flood holds could store two more-fold bait than regular selling vessels. Following this, under the pilot project Yanmar marine diesel engines were installed in additional four traditional fishing sailing boats.

Hon. Ahmed Hilmy, Minister of Fisheries and Japanese Ambassador of Japan to the Republic of Maldives, H.E. Mr. Mr. Akira Yoshioka at the ceremony to mark the installation of first marine inboard disease engine fishing vessels, specially built for a boat by the name of “Ummeedhu”.

Consequently, on 25 January 1975, ‘Ummeedh Dhoni’ was sent by the Ministry of Fisheries to Noonu Atoll to be operated under the administration of Noon Atoll Committee. On this historic journey, Noon Atoll Chief Mr. Holhudhoo Meyna Kaleyfaanu also traveled by Umeeddu Dhoni to Noonu Atoll on this trip and the islanders were deeply shocked, utterly amazed and watched with awe as the Ummeedh Dhoni went fishing for third time on the same day, caught fish beyond the average catch and news of the success story spread amongst the fishing community all over the country.

Although local fishermen were skeptical at first, believing that the fish would be scared by the noise of the propeller, engine and gears of the newly mechanized fishing dhoni. Local fishermen also considered that the traditional design of the dhoni could not be modified or upgraded nor could it be technically feasible to install inboard diesel engines. Nevertheless, when men set out fishing on inboard engine dhonis, started landing tons of fish, the perception of locals began to transform more positively. Furthermore, one of the five engine dhonis were operated by the National Security Service (NSS), and the Government sent NSS men on fishing to demonstrate the efficiency of the new vessels. Even the Minister of Fisheries Hon. Ahmed Hilmy, personally visited the outer islands and met with the local traditional fishermen to convince and encourage them to install marine diesel
engines to improve the efficiency of fishing vessels and thus improve their livelihoods. These initiatives helped changed the mind-set of the inhabitants and shed light on the importance of mechanizing fishing vessels in the Maldives.

Hence, the Government of Maldives embarked on a quest to the mechanize traditional sailing fishing boats nationwide, without any interruption and by February 1976 almost 70 engines were installed in local fishing vessels out of the 116 engines received from Government of Japan as a grant. On 22 February 1976, in its aim to get additional engines, a two-member Maldives delegation consisting of Mr. Fathulah Jameel, Wakeel, the Department of External Affairs and Mr. Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, Deputy Ambassador of Maldives in Colombo met the Ambassador of Japan to Maldives H.E Mr. Akira Yoshioka in Colombo and requested for an additional 300 diesel engines as grant assistance and if not they sought the possibility of purchasing 300 engines from Japanese company through the Government of Japan on an installment basis. This time, the Government of Maldives specified its request for 150 marine diesel engines with 22 horse power and 150 marine diesel engines with 33 horsepower.

In the late 1970s, the Japanese Yanmar Company Limited opened their Yanmar Diesel Engines Service Centers in Meemu Mulak, Lhaviyani Naafaru, Dhaalu Kudahuvadhoo and Raa Ugoofaru in Maldives. Japanese instructors from Yanmar Company Limited, based in Male’ also trained locals in the maintenance and repair of Yanmar marine diesel engines maintenance and repairs, while some Maldivians also received specialized training in Japan as well.

Reflecting back, the new mechanized sailing boats were seven times faster and much more maneuverable. In many cases, the fish catch is seen to have doubled. Impressively, the number

A mechanized boat (Dhoni) in 1980s without the sail mast and boom. However, in 1970s, it was compulsory for a mechanized Dhoni to carry sail inboard or even with engine for emergency purposes.
of fishing days has also increased by 15%, as the boats could go out fishing even in low wind. At the time, around 80% of Maldives male workforce was fishermen and at present more than 90% of the fishing sailing boats in Maldives are mechanized. The changes in the structure of fisheries industry, especially mechanization, affected the socio-economic life of the people. The women in the islands, who were involved in the processing of fish diverted to other works such as mat weaving, coir making, while more men turned to emerging manufacturing and services industries for alternative occupation.

By 1978, a total of 548 dhonis were mechanized and by the end of 1987 a total of 1,334 dhonis were installed with Yanmar Marine Diesel engines. Mechanization of traditional sailing fishing boats has revolutionized the fishing industry as a whole and it was one of the instrumental factors for the country to move beyond the daily struggle from a subsistence economy to a market economy and towards economic growth and prosperity. The mechanization of fishing vessels in the country is one of the most impressive projects that provided the most relevant technology to wide-range of Maldivians and has been instrumental in bringing about the economic and social transformation observed in the daily livelihood of the Maldivians.
Highlights of 50 Years of Diplomatic Relations between Maldives & Japan

15 June 2017

Japanese Ambassador to the Republic of Maldives His Excellency Mr. Kazumi Endo paid a courtesy call on Vice President of the Republic of Maldives HE Abdulla Jihad
04 May 2017
Japanese Ambassador to Maldives Kazumi Endo presenting the grant assistance of medical equipment worth USD605,729.76 to Health Minister Mr Abdulla Nazim Ibrahim
25 April 2017

Ambassador of the Republic of Maldives to Japan, HE Mohamed Hussain Shareef thanked Dr. Kitaoka for JICA’s unparalleled contributions towards socio-economic development in the Maldives
24 April 2017

On Behalf of the Government of the Republic of Maldives, Minister of Foreign Affairs HE Dr. Mohamed Asim and on behalf of the Government of Japan, Ambassador of Japan to the Maldives HE Kazumi Endo signed the Exchange of Notes for further promoting the economic and social development of the Maldives.
30 March 2017
The Japan International Cooperation Agency signed an agreement with the Government of Maldives to provide up to ¥2,792 million (US$25 million) in grant aid for a project to develop a Digital Terrestrial Television Broadcasting Network.

31 May 2017


27 October 2016

HE Katsuyuki Kawai, the Special Advisor to the Prime Minister of Japan, HE Shinzō Abe paid a courtesy call on the President of Maldives HE Abdulla Yameen Abdul Gayoom

01 September 2016
The first resident Ambassador of Japan, His Excellency Mr. Kazumi Endo presented his Letter of Credence to President of the Maldives HE Abdulla Yameen Abdul Gayoom
07 August 2016

The Ambassador of Japan to the Republic of Maldives His Excellency Kenichi Suganuma paid the farewell call on HE Abdulla Yameen Abdul Gayoom, President of the Republic of Maldives
21 July 2016

At a meeting held with HE President Abdulla Yameen Abdul Gayoom, President of the Republic of Maldives, the Executive Vice President and Executive Officer of Asia Pacific of Hitachi Ltd, Mr. Junzo Najazima, announced of plans to donate one million Maldivian rufiyaa to Male’ Water Crisis Management Fund.
15 December 2014
The Minister of Internal Affairs and Communications of Japan HE Mr. Yoshitaka Shindo paid a courtesy call on HE Abdullah Yameen Abdul Gayoom, President of the Republic of Maldives
16 April 2014

HE Abdulla Yameen Abdul Gayoom, President of the Republic of Maldives meets with the President of Hitachi, Mr. Toshiaki Higashihara, and the Governor of the Japan Bank for International Cooperation (JBIC), Mr. Hiroshi Watanabe, and the Senior Vice President of the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), Mr. Hideaki Domichi.

Japan opens first resident Embassy in the Maldives on 01 January 2016
HE Mr. Koichiro Gemba, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Japan, held a meeting with the Hon. Mr. Ahmed Naseem, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Maldives.

January 18, 2012

The plaque commemorating the “Fehifaiy” (Green Leaf), the National Environmental Award of Maldives to the people of Japan - the award reflects the Maldivian government’s high acknowledgment of the sea wall facilities constructed under Japan’s assistance.

June 2006

During the visit to attend the World Assembly for Women in Tokyo: 2015, HE Ms. Dunya Maumoon, Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Republic of Maldives calls on HE Mr. Fumio Kishida, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Japan.

Aug 28, 2015
During the Special ASEAN Leaders’ Meeting on Aftermath of Earthquake and Tsunami in Jakarta, Minister of Foreign Affairs HE Mr. Fathulla Jameel of the Republic of Maldives paid a courtesy call on HE Mr. Nobutaka Machimura, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Japan
06 January 2005

President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom of Maldives presents the “Fehifaiy” (Green Leaf) National Environmental Award in 2006
The Maldives enjoys warm and close ties of friendship and cooperation with Japan, a country which plays a vital role in our endeavors to achieve strident national progress. Over the past 50 years, Japan’s contribution to our national development has been sustained throughout, transcending to a number of fields, and continues to be significant in scope and scale.

The Male’ coastal protection, conceived in the wake of tidal wave surges that caused extensive damage and destruction to Male’ and to several other islands throughout the Maldives in 1987, which resulted in serious damage estimating approximately US $6million, represents an immense undertaking on the part of the Japanese government. In the consequences of the event, the Government of Maldives sought external assistance from several sources.
The Male’ Seawall, serves as an enduring symbol of the close and traditional ties of friendship and co-operation of friendship and co-operation between the people of Maldives and people of Japan.

for disaster relief and strengthening coastal defense systems. The most encouraging and significant response for international assistance by the Government of Maldives was from the Government of Japan in 1990 in the form of the construction of a detached breakwater on the south side of Male’, the area most prone to storm surges.

With the completion of the emergency construction of Male’ Southern Breakwater Project, the Government of Maldives felt that the existing coastal protection structures were poor as they were constructed from coral boulders 10 to 20 cm in size and capped with cement mortar and there were also sections of seawall which were missing. Given the context, the urgency of seeking a permanent and secure coastal disaster prevention plan was an imminent necessity to secure the capital city, Male’. Hence, within just three months after a request from the Maldives for technical assistance, the Japanese government team arrived in Male’ to conduct a feasibility study and basic design studies by Japan International Cooperation Agency. The Male’ Seawall Construction Project for Male’ was implemented on the basis of the results of the study between 1991 and 1992 and the subsequent requests by the Government of Maldives in 1993, which led to the financing for the Male’ Seawall Construction Project through a grant aid cooperation of the Government of Japan.

The Male’ Seawall Construction Project completed in four different phases at a total cost of US$48 million and is the biggest project ever carried out by the Government of Japan under its Grant Aid Scheme. The first phase of the project, 774 meters of seawall was constructed on the west coast of Male’, where urgent implementation of appropriate counter measures are called for. The completion of phase 1 of the project of the Male’ Seawall
Construction Project saw the implementation of the phase 2 of the project in 1995. The total length of the seawall constructed under the phase is 1225.9 meters. This phase saw the construction of an artificial beach, considered as a heaven in the urban city for enjoying an evening walk or a swim. Each phase was concentrated on reinforcing the coastal protection facilities of a new coast of Male’ and the project has contributed to the safeguard of the capital and instigates a feeling of security on the everyday lives of the people of Male’.

The 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami revealed the relevance of the sea wall and its effectiveness to mitigate the catastrophic damage on the Island. Following the 2004 Indian Asian Tsunami, an eleven-member Japanese technical team visited the Maldives and undertook a survey on the impact of Indian Ocean Tsunami in the Maldives and the preliminary report of the survey on the impact of the Tsunami in the Maldives, demonstrated that despite two-third of Male’ were being flooded and although there were causalities, Male’ avoided the catastrophic damage from tsunami. The same results have been confirmed in the numerical simulations by the Japanese survey team in two cases of “with seawall and “without seawall” for the 2004’s tsunami hitting on Male’.

As we mark the 50th anniversary of diplomatic relations between Maldives and Japan to reflect on the historical ties of friendship that exist between the two Asian allies, we note with gratitude the expeditious and sincere assistance given to Maldives at a time when the country was in dire need of such assistance.
As we celebrate the golden jubilee of Maldives-Japan relations, this article revisits the success story of how the Government of Japan, including its Business corporations such as Nippon Electric Company (NEC) NEC and Mitsui Co. have been instrumental in the development, operation and maintenance of the telecommunications industry in the Maldives. While, only a handful of literature is available on the subject, this article reviewed “My Log Book: 1947-2008”, a narrative account of personal experiences on the development of the nation written by late Ali Umar Manik who served the Government for more than 50 years and held various positions, such as serving as the Secretary to the Head of the Foreign Ambassadors Office, Special Lawyer in the Prime Minister’s Office, Trade Ambassador for Maldives and as the Minister of Shipping. It also considered technical studies by Japan International Cooperation Agency (JAICA) and interviewed key individuals in the sector, so as to draw a more comprehensive description of Japanese assistance to the development of telecommunications in the Maldives.

First Portable Earth Station

At a time when tourism as a new industry began in the Maldives in 1972, beyond introducing a small automatic telephone exchange in Male’, the government had not given careful consideration to the development of communications in the country. This was the time when external communications between the Government in Male’ and the outside world, was wireless and communication was through a special HF telex link between Maldives Shipping Limited (MSL) in Male’ and MSL in Bombay.
which was made possible through the assistance of the Indian Government.

In 1976 the Government received a leaflet by NEC for a portable Earth Station Satellite Dish and was quoted at US $1.5 million for the cost of equipment and an additional US $49,189 for installation and testing, an exponential sum for the Maldives, one of the poorest countries within the UN classified list as a Least Developing Country then. Being the latest technology of the day and even though such a system required technical manpower and expertise to operate it, President Ibrahim Nasir’s Government planned on securing foreign aid and even to allocate a few resources to procure the system. Reflecting back, the logic of this decision reveals the country’s dire need for acquiring the latest technology in its efforts to speed up the development of the country. Given the limited resources, this was not an easy task as it was not simply about buying a satellite dish but more of an ambitious undertaking, which required the country to find a reliable operator including the installation of equipment, technical manpower and all the other activities for the country to be on a satellite communication covering telephone, telex, fax, TV etc.

In Singapore, Umar Manik in his capacity...
as the Government’s Commercial Secretary,contacted the representatives of NEC Corporation and requested to prepare a detailed proposal with a firm quotation on the terms of supplying, procuring and installation of the equipment and providing technical training for the operation and maintenance. Following this, the NEC and Mitsui officials visited Maldives and undertook a preliminary survey for setting up a satellite station. The proposal for the installation of the Earth Station including an international switching center was discussed with NEC officials in Tokyo. The Maldivian delegation was told that the equipment operated in the Indian Ocean was on Frequency-Division Duplexing (FDD) system and since it had no more free circuits available, a special request for release of a slot may be made via International Telecommunications Satellite Organization (Intelsat). The Director of Maldives Telecommunications was thereafter asked to travel to the United States to negotiate membership for the Maldives with Intelsat. It was to their delight the Maldivian authorities received the good news that a frequency could be allocated immediately if the country decides to opt for a new system.

In the meantime, in the region a new satellite based on Single channel per carrier/ Personal communications network (SCPC/PCN) system was in operation and would take over all the frequency-division multiplexing (FDM) systems within two years. NEC engineers noted that the Maldives could become the first country to install the new system on a small satellite dish and assured that the only technical problem faced would be, if any, a slight delay in the transfer of the signal, which the human ear would not recognise.

Given that the Maldives would be the first to use the new system, such a transfer would unduly subject the country to trial and error experimentation, Honourable Ali Umar Manik noted that the system could possibly be recommended for Maldives only with a guarantee by NEC to address any defects that might be encountered without any additional costs and because of the risks involved, it was further negotiated for the cost of the system for US $1,350,000, a reduction of $150,000 from the initially quoted amount.

The Government had also earlier received a similar proposal which had minor technical shortcomings from the Cable & Wireless Company and it was NEC which agreed to resolve them without any additional cost. Thus, modern satellite communications began with equipment for the Satellite Earth Station and an International
Switching Center in 1976 by NEC and Mitsui Co. of Japan which remained in service until the 1990s. Although the Government signed an agreement with Cable and Wireless for an initial period of 10 years, commencing from 1 January 1977 for operating and developing international telecommunications of the Maldives, it was NEC which laid the foundations for the development of telecommunications in the Maldives.

The Introduction of Television to the Maldives

After the successful installment of satellite communications, the Government of the Maldives embarked on a new project: the introduction of television to the Maldives. Having had an amicable working relationship with NEC and given that the company produced the necessary equipment with the latest technology, NEC Company was being considered as a potential party for setting up television transmission in the country. Against this background, a review meeting was held in Colombo and NEC engineers recommended various combinations of equipment and to provide different areas of transmission for the TV signals. To this, the Maldives chose equipment which would give a radius of 15 nautical miles. On the basis of NEC technical expertise, the Maldives archipelago, characterized by flat land with no mountains, were at an advantage and can reasonably expect a coverage area of more than that, perhaps up to 20-25 nautical miles.

The Project also involved building of the television station with studio facilities. One of the major challenges faced was on how to set up a TV transmission aerial mast. The project contracted NEC to supply the complete equipment for the TV transmission station, along with the drawings for the construction of the station. NEC was also to fabricate the TV transmission aerial mast in a ‘knock down’ condition while the Maldives government was to provide the foundation for the transmission tower and to assemble the mast. The Maldives negotiated with NEC for an all inclusive sum of US $450 000 for the delivery and installation of all the equipment and to conduct tests, train two Maldivians in the operation and maintenance of the equipment and colour transmission.

Just after eleven months since the inception of the project, the national television station (TVM) was opened on March 29 1978, with a transmission radius of 25 miles. During this time, the studio consisted of 2 cameras, 9 lights, an Umatic leybond player and a recorder, 2 set control rooms for Telseneey system for 16 millimetre screen films
and slides. The channel broadcasts news, current affairs and a variety of entertainment programs. At the time of TV transmission, four staff were trained in Japan. Ever since its inception, Japanese grant aid was instrumental in establishing and developing the Television Maldives. Japan has been the leading assistance provider to the broadcasting sector, with their assistance in the form of radio receivers for educational program in 1978. In 1986, Japan granted production equipment to TVM Maldives to establish a full-fledged studio, an outdoor studio and 2 sets of Umetic system. Following this in 1995, Japanese provided grant assistance for the supply of audio-recording equipment for Voice of Maldives on 27 September 1995 amounting to US $ 479,000 and on November 1996, under the Japanese grant assistance of US $377 005, a new production studio for TVM including a Betacam post production and editing set-up and 2 Betacam set for out-door shooting was possible. Additionally, Japan also provided technical assistance and helped develop staff capacity and expertise in field of broadcasting. Admittedly, the analogue transmitter, the television studio and the transmission tower installed by Japan remains intact and unchanged at this day and time, even after almost forty years since it was first installed.

Development of Telecommunications

During the 1980s as tourism started to become a lucrative industry, service sectors including construction, trade and maritime transport were booming and received a high priority by the Government. Similarly, sectors such as education, fisheries and health care development were being listed at high priority areas for foreign aid and technical assistance. One of the major reasons that the development of telecommunications had received a low priority than duly warranted was due to a lack of economic capital. Nevertheless, it soon became more and more apparent that the telecommunications which were at its infancy was more or less stagnating the overall socio-economic development of the nation.

Hence, during the early 1980s, the Government recognized the significance of telecommunications as a means for enhancing social interaction, efficiency in public administration, achieving political cohesiveness and balancing the socio-economic development of the country. Thus, the Government prioritized the development and modernization of telecommunications and on the basis of a 3-year Master Plan developed by UNDP in 1981,
the Government of the Maldives requested the Government of Japan for grant assistance in realizing the outcomes of this vision. Hence, a basic design on the development of telecommunications in the Maldives was conducted, with a JAICA study team headed by Mr. Seikou Fukudu visiting Maldives from 20 October 1984 to 13 November 1984. The JAICA Study Report (1984), noted that during this time, the practicality of communications between the distant atolls and Islands was made possible only through short wave radio sets and simple hand held radio sets equipped in the administration centers at the national level, in the atoll and Island centres. As the frequency was shared by more than one user, allowable transmission has been limited. Furthermore, automated telephone systems were only available in the capital city Male’ and the equipment were either outdated or lacked adequate capacity and procuring spare parts were becoming all the more difficult. Not to mention, the chaos which may be faced in the event of a natural calamity such that which would require emergency relief supplies and assistance for the islands completely surrounded by sea and scattered through a geographical area of 90 000 square kilometers.

Under the Communications Development project, the Japanese provided grant assistance of about US$ 18,792,309 divided into different phases of telecommunications development for the Construction of the Telecommunications Center, a digital exchange center for the Male’ cable network and an atoll communication system. More specifically, the Male’ Telecommunication Center, a four-storeyed steel structure with a total floor area of 1570 square metres and a 30-metre-high steel tower, was to be used for communications equipment and training facilities and as an administrative section of the POSTEL Building which later housed the Department of Post and Telecommunications. The Ari-Atoll communication system with an HF link was established in nine islands with relatively higher population in the atoll. Lastly, the Male’ telephone system was upgraded and included a digital switching equipment and an underground cable network with a capacity sufficient to meet the subscriber demand for up to ten years.

Dhivehi
Raageyge Gulhun (Dhiraagu)

With the lease of the satellite dish installed by NEC, rental of the POSTEL building and through royalty calls, the Government generated an annual revenue of US$ 225 000 from the Cable & Wireless Company which was
perceived as much lower, given the high price-tag attached to the services offered. At the onset of negotiating the terms and conditions for the renewal of the franchise agreement beyond the initial expiry date in 1986, the government bargained for establishing a Joint Venture Company, Dhiraagu, with the initial idea to operate the communications at national level by the Maldives Telecommunications Department and overseas communications to be handled by Dhiraagu. Yet, due to the economic constraints faced, purchasing equity let alone subscribing up to 49 percent paid capital was practically impossible for the Government. Hence, the Maldives requested for Japanese grant assistance, which would be injected as funds for Maldives Government’s capital to Dhiraage and buy 55 percent share of the company. As a result, on 16 May 1988, Dhivehi Raajjeyge Gulhun Private Limited became the first joint venture telecommunications company with 55 percent owned by the Government of the Maldives and 45 percent owned by Cable and Wireless PLC. Consequently, by the early 1990s the Maldives had acquired one of the most advanced telecommunications networks in South Asia and by 2000, every inhabited island in the Maldives had
telephone connections with public call boxes. At present, the country has crossed several milestones in terms of telecommunications, internet connectivity and 100 percent mobile coverage to all inhabited islands, resorts and industrial Islands.

Towards this end, more recently the Government of Maldives has signed an agreement with JAICA for grant assistance of up to 2792 Million Yen for an Integrated Service Digital Broadcasting-Terrestrial (ISDB_T) television network through Maldives in March 2017. This initiative when implemented will reduce information disparities across the archipelago, expand broadcasting services and ensure speedy communication of early warnings as a measure to combat climate change and enable in the disaster risk reduction.

To conclude, similar to the Japanese contribution to a variety of sectors including economic development, the fisheries sector, climate change and renewable energy, disaster risk reduction and assistance to grassroots movements which benefited greatly, the contribution of the Japanese assistance to telecommunications forms the bedrock for bridging the digital divide across the country, a remarkable contribution which will remain in our hearts and minds for generations to come.
Japan – the land of politeness and punctuality

Mr. Ahmed Sareer
Foreign Secretary
Ministry of Foreign Affairs

As Maldives and Japan celebrate a half century since the establishment of diplomatic relations, my thoughts go back to the fond memories of my first visit to Japan seventeen years ago. When we speak of a country, there are often immediate associations that come to our mind. For example, foreigners associate the Maldives with white sandy beaches. In the same manner, with Japan, the first attributes that come to my mind are the politeness and the punctuality of its people.

Japan has a strong culture that believes in punctuality and discipline. The Japanese also believe in predictability, consistency, and reliability. This is reflected in their business practices and even in their day-to-day lifestyle. For example, bus and train schedules in Japan are very practical; if the schedule reads that the next arrival will be at 9:25, the bus or train will arrive exactly at that given time. This just goes to show how deeply engrained, punctuality is, within their culture.

Japanese people believe that this is the first step towards building trust amongst people. People who have never lived in Japan or have never been to the country, may come to the conclusion that it is a very strict country, difficult for foreigners to live in. As someone who has been to Japan however, I would say it’s quite the opposite: it is a paradise for foreigners.

I had the opportunity to visit Japan for the first time in 2000, attending the counterpart youth volunteer programme organised by Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA). Through this programme, I learnt that timekeeping, discipline and efficiency are not only instrumental in the organisation of the programme, but also a way of life in Japan.

On arrival at Narita International airport, we were presented with a comprehensive agenda of our entire programme.
that included the timings of our expected wake-up calls, morning breakfast, and the exact time of pick-up from our hotel by the extremely courteous Japanese guide who was assigned to our group. The kind-hearted escort was always prepared with exceptional responses to the plethora of curiosity, members of our group presented to her. On occasions when she did not have the right information to our queries, she, without fail, ensured that the accurate data was conveyed to the novel tourist, at the earliest.

Since 2000, I have also had the opportunity to visit Japan on few other occasions, allowing me to widely travel within the country, taking me to places in Tokyo, Hiroshima, Nagoya, and Sendai, and many others. With every place I visited, and every Japanese I met, my admiration for the Japanese commitment to simplicity, discipline and decorous nature increased.

Later in life, through work, I was fortunate to meet a number of Japanese diplomats in the various stations I served. My fascination about Japan’s culture and its unique traits such as punctuality, and their well-mannered behaviour, grew more. Courtesy, respect and decency were common attributes in every Japanese diplomat I met.

In fact, during the JICA training programme I learnt that politeness has a distinct application in the Japanese vocabulary – different from the way we generally understand it. The Japanese word “teinei”, for the English word “polite”, applies not only for people and their actions but for objects as well. I gathered teinei simply refers to “gently” and “with utmost care”. In addition to exercising politeness during human interaction, the term extends to describe the ways of presenting a gift, creating a craft, decorating flowers, etc. In Japan, politeness is also associated with respect and patience.

In this sense, politeness promotes harmony. It is an everyday attribute that we as humans should follow. Punctuality is another such trait that ensures reliability, and earns credibility. We, Maldivians have much to learn from the people of Japan in this regard.

It is pleasing to note that during the past 50 strong years of Maldives-Japan ties, a feature that is outstanding in Japan’s development cooperation to the Maldives is their contribution to our education sector, and the development of our people-to-people contact. It is education, and exchanges of experiences and culture, that transform the way we think, inculcating these beautiful values at an early age. It is essential for these qualities to be emulated, in order for us to advance as a well-developed society.
Public Service at its Peak – Sharing the Japanese Experience

Ahmed Hassan Didi,
Additional Secretary,
Ministry of Foreign Affairs

The Japanese Public Service is renowned for their efficiency and effectiveness in service delivery. In 2012, as the Head of the Civil Service Commission (CSC), I had the opportunity to lead a delegation to Japan on a bilateral visit, whereby we had unique insights into the governance and public administration system in Japan. The visit also provided the opportunity to explore the training centre of the Civil Service, the Shinagawa Aquarium which showcased the local government structure an exemplary success story and met with the Japan-Maldives Parliamentarian League.

Exposure trips of this nature is of more relevance to a country like the Maldives, especially at a time, when the country is crossing its first threshold of establishing a modern and professional public service in the Maldives, and within the context in which the country is undergoing profound political, economic and social transformations. The public service institutions, still relatively very young in its existence, can draw valuable lessons from the vast experiences of its well-established public service administration and management in Japan.

The meeting with the National Personnel Authority (NPA) exposed us to the public administration systems in Japan, opening our eyes, and the take-
home points from this learning experiences are manifold; Japan’s strength and success lies in a strong NPA to oversee, nurture and regulate the role of public service.

The public employees of Japan mainly comprise of the two major dual systems; the Regular Service and the Special Service. Under the Constitution, the Japanese civil servants cannot work for a political party, and the Cabinet selects the President of N.P.A. The characteristic norm for the country is to have a high ranking career civil servant in government offices and to have only a limited number of political appointees. Such a system ensures that effective career pathways, retention of staff, bureaucratic efficiency and overall improvement in public sector performance.

Japanese Civil Service has an annual recruitment process which begins in May, with the first stage of examination and the successful candidates are recruited from respective government ministries in July.

In 2012, NPA introduced new examination process which shifted its focus to ability and aptitude-based exams and performance-based exams. Their concentration on securing versatile human resources stems from a New Personal Appraisal system, a combination of performance based management and competence based performance evaluation, introduced in 2009.

While public entitlement to service is given priority, the National Public Service Act, prohibits the Civil Servants from going on strike. NPA also ensures a fair remuneration package for the public servants. Thus, based on inflation and private sector remunerations, NPA makes remuneration recommendations to the Cabinet and “Diet”
Training for the Civil Servants is mainly categorized as on-the-job, or off-the-job trainings. On the one hand, on-the-job trainings usually include subject areas such as studies on ethics of public employees, case studies of administrative policies, and studies on Ministry policies. On the other hand, off-the-job trainings usually include longer term overseas fellowship programmes of 1-2 years. Impressively, this period is counted as service for pension and the staff are paid their salaries.

Trainings are conducted on a daily basis, at the National Institute of Public Administration (NIPA) located at Saitama, Iruma-shi city – roughly a one hour and forty-five minutes’ drive from Tokyo with a highly efficient set up, the Institute and its facilities were simply impressive, making it a highly recommended model to follow, especially so within the context of setting up a Civil Service Training Institute.

NIPA is one of the four divisions of the National Personal Authority. While NIPA does not impose any compulsory training hours per year, NIPAs trainings consist of mainly case studies, forums or discussions among participants, with the courses being designed to suit competency of participants.

Japan also takes pride in its language, and is reflected in its modes of delivery. All the content and course materials of NIPA are in Japanese and all courses are
conducted in Japanese. Only a limited number of foreign participants, if at all, are accepted for these courses on the basis of their fluency in Japanese.

The brief visit to Shinagawa Aquarium was an awe-inspiring experience for developing Maldivian institutions and understanding excellent Japanese hospitality.

We also learned of the many avenues open for Japanese assistance to Maldives and gained invaluable insights for our institution building, strengthening our operation systems, understanding the best practices and ways of creating effective systems with continuous improvements, building and nurturing an ethical and high-performance organisational culture, which rests with the empowerment of the people.
Part of the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), the Japanese Overseas Cooperation Volunteers (JOCV), has been active in the Maldives since 1982. Modelled on the Volunteer Corp Programme of the USA, the JOCV programme aims to contribute to the socio-economic development of the country, with a view to promoting friendship and strengthen understanding between Japan and its partner countries. It also aims to promote international understanding of Japanese lifestyle through volunteer experiences.

In the Maldives, the programme has been ongoing for nearly four decades. The first office of JOCV was established in Maldives in 1981 with the signing of the exchange note between Maldives and Japan. Japanese volunteers who are sent to the Maldives undergo specialized training on the language and culture of the Maldives.

JOCVs work for two years in the Maldives. During this time, they live with a local family, enjoying local cuisine, learning Dhivehi, the local language. Therefore, it is beneficial for both the communities they are placed in, as well as to the volunteer.

They are mainly engaged in the areas
of fisheries, sports and youth development, energy, governance and environment. To date, 330 JOCVs have worked in the Maldives. In addition, four Senior Volunteers, above the age of 40, worked in the Maldives, under the Senior Volunteer Programme in 2002. Currently, five JOCVs have been dispatched to different islands – three working in Physical Education, one in Primary Education, and one in Vegetable growing.

The contribution of these volunteers is immense. Local athletes, trained by JOCVs have even reached the level of national coaches in areas such as athletics, volley, table tennis, badminton, swimming and other areas. In fact they have contributed to the further strengthening of the relationship through mutual understanding and respect, created at the community level, and will continue to be a shining avenue of cooperation and collaboration.
It was the 1978: the year President Maumoon took office for the first time. The Maldives was still a relatively underdeveloped country. Literacy was low. Education levels had not soared yet. Male’, with its unpaved roads, bicycles instead of motorcycles, with no high rise buildings, was filled with trees and greenery.

As a volunteer for the Development Association of Youth Leaders, a young, 27-year-old Tokihiko Sakamoto had no substantial knowledge about the country, he was being posted to. His job was to be a physical education teacher at the only girl’s school in the capital city: Aminiya School. He was the first volunteer to be posted from Japan to the Maldives. Along with him, there were other volunteers from the UK and other European countries already in the country, and also expatriate teachers from neighbouring countries, though the community of foreigners in the capital was small. Sakamoto remembers with some amusement how the young boys would reach out to touch his hands and his face, because they had never seen a Japanese before.

For the first month or so, Sakamoto did not have much to do – there was no gym, no swimming pool, no equipment – he couldn’t conduct the classes he wanted. He had to raise his concern to the Principal and supervisors at Aminiya – and all too soon, a boat was arranged to a nearby island, where he taught the students of Aminiya School and Majeedhiyya School how to swim. His students still remember him, he says, and takes him to their houses for tea, and Sakamoto’s favourite biskemiyi – a Maldivian short eat consisting of a flour pocket filled with cooked cabbage and boiled egg. He also mentions a special

Mariyam Midhfa Naeem,
Director,
Ministry of Foreign Affairs
fondness for fried mushi
mas (bigeye scads)
served fresh at the
Junction Hotaa (a local
teahouse, at the junction
of Majeedhee Magu and
Chaandhanee Magu),
where he says with
some residual confusion,
that he used to get his
change in cigarettes.
Sakamoto says he once
tried to pay for his food
in cigarettes – the lady
at the register was not
amused.
He spent much of his
free time exploring
his new home. What
surprised him most,
he said, was that every
house in Male’ – in
Maldives – had a name.
This was different from
Tokyo, where houses
were given numbers. He
was further surprised
that nobody locked
their doors. With this,
he gestured to the busy
street outside and said,
“Male’ is so busy now,
like Tokyo or any other
city in the world”.
He misses the old,
quiet “city”, he says,
but nevertheless, he
is impressed with the
development seen in
Male’.
Sakamoto has also
contributed to this
development. After
his time in Aminiya,
he left to form a travel
agency with a local
Maldivian, and set up
While the island was
small, the atmosphere
was pure Maldivian.
Boasting lush greenery,
and a magnificent
house reef, the island
epitomized the best of
what Maldivian tourism
of “sun, sand and sea”
had to offer.
The island also was a
pioneer resort. It was the
first resort to introduce
the now-iconic over-
water bungalows
to the Maldives.
Sakamoto recalls how
well wishers, critics,
the general public, and even newspapers concluded that overwater bungalows were too expensive, and therefore would fail. At the time, the going rate for a hotel room in the Maldives was between 30 and 80 US dollars per night – he was charging over 1000 US dollars for a water bungalow. Yet the concept that Sakamoto had first seen in Tahiti, and adapted to the Maldivian context, did not fail. Infact the island thrived. Sakamoto says that the objective of Vadoo was to sell the best of what Maldives had to offer – the beautiful natural environment, and the warmth, generosity and hospitality of its people. These two traits he said, are the cornerstone of Maldivian tourism. In fact, it is the people of the Maldives he remembers most fondly. He relayed off a number of names of people, their houses and their lineage from memory – a clear demonstration of just how invested he is in this country and its people. The values, the philosophy, and the principles – these are what he says makes the Maldives distinct. Sakamoto relays two incidents to prove his point. When a fire occurred on Vadoo Resort, he saw how the staff lined up in three lines, and worked together to carry water – by hand – from the sea to the fire. It was surprising to him, to see how organized, how ready they were, and how they worked together. “I didn't even have to say anything”, he says.

Another incident was the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami. When the tsunami waves engulfed the Maldives, he was in his resort. The next day, he took a boat to Male’. As the boat entered Male harbour, he found it empty – a scene he had never encountered during all his time in Maldives. He asked his crew. They informed him that all the people had gone to their respective islands to support and help their families, their communities. This, he says, showed him, beyond anything else, the spirit of the Maldivian community, the values of Maldivians. The way the relief effort was coordinated, how the emergency response centre was set up so quickly, and organized into separate teams, showed him, that in times of crisis, Maldivians were one, that the Maldivian philosophy, though geographically very far from Japan, was very similar in nature to the Japanese.

He came to teach the Maldivians. Yet, Maldives ended up teaching him much more. Sakamoto recalls his time in the Maldives as an eventual realisation of just how similar Maldives and Japan are – in values, in principles, in loving country and community. This, he says is why he keeps coming back, even after he left in 2005. Currently, with his Foundation, he is working to set up educational programmes about environmental management, waste management in
particular. He works closely with the Japanese Embassy in Male’, as well as the Japanese community, connecting investors, businesses, community leaders and civil society organisations.

Sakamoto believes that over the past fifty years, the relationship between Maldives and Japan have soared to many heights. Japanese people love Maldivians – he says – and Maldivian dried fish! When asked about how he thinks Maldivians regard Japanese, he defers, saying, “that’s a question for Maldivians themselves”.

It is people like Sakamoto-san who have contributed immensely, to the development and to the community of the Maldives, that shape the view of Maldivians to the Japanese: as a reliable, stable, true friend.
Growing up, my first impression about a foreign nation was that of Japan and its people. We were told stories about the Japanese hospitality, their acts of kindness towards the Maldives with the ongoing grants and constant aid to our small nation from the mega-seawall project to the wheat flour aid, every Maldivian family received. With a text worth mentioning written prominently along with the red circle of the Japanese rising sun on each wheat sack; “Aid from the people of Japan” remains imprinted in the minds of any Maldivian of my age.

We often say “Family by chance, friends by choice”, for me friendship is like the family we choose, unlike the family we are born into. I am really grateful for all the friends I have made along the way, who are still present in my life. I have been truly blessed to have the best of friends, and some of them are here at home and some of them are quite faraway. Consider this a little gift of sorts, for the latter- all my friends in Japan whose presence in my life are very prominent despite the physical distance. I would like to express my gratitude for how they have touched my life and how much they mean to me.

I started working in a Japanese travel agency called Cox and Kings in the year 2001. There I had the opportunity to work alongside many Japanese colleagues, over a span of 16 years. I made really good friends, almost like family and I would like to highlight two very special people, Mr. Saito and Mr. Hasegawa, who have both been my bosses at different periods of time. They have motivated me to learn and grow as a person. Mr. Saito as my mentor, was like father figure for me. They always encouraged me to improve further and made me believe I am capable of achieving much more in life. Their
words of wisdom and guidance have made a huge influence on my professional life and career.

While working in Cox & Kings, getting to interact with Japanese travelers visiting the Maldives was a part of my job. Many of these travelers instantly fell in love with the Maldives and our way of life. Year in year out they visit Maldives for holidays, naturally they make friends in Maldives both from resorts and with the travel agents. With time, the mutual bond between friends becomes so strong that they feel obliged to visit Maldives just to see their friends and vice versa. In my area of work I got to know many wonderful people who still keep close contact and visits Maldives regularly. Some special friends like Mr. Nakajima, Ms. Yamada, Mr/s Tsuji are more like family to me now and I have visited them in Japan, experienced their hospitality and care and I have nothing but profound gratitude and love for them.

Over the years JICA and JOCV have been much involved in our socio-economic developments. JOCV has been providing volunteer teachers for more than 30 years. These volunteers build a strong bond with their host families and the island communities they serve. Kaki san, Chika san, Iku san, Masa san are a few among the many JOCV volunteers who have worked in the Maldives and they have also become very wonderful friends of mine. I have nothing but good things to say about them. They have helped me tremendously in learning the Japanese language and culture. They have fallen in love with Maldives just as I have with their country. Some of them visit Maldives almost annually to meet their friends and their host families. They have beautifully embraced our culture and way of life, like many other JOCV volunteers.

When I started learning Japanese to facilitate my work and for job requirements, I was not expecting to fall in love with Japan, but the more I learned about the Japanese language, their rich culture and heritage, the more impressed and interested I became to know more about the kind nature of the people of Japan. I was moved by their
kindness and most of all, their thoughtfulness and consideration which I got to witness during my first visit to Japan as a student of JENESYS Programme.

Our Sensei at that time, Mr. Tanabe initiated a teacher training programme. We were being taught the Japanese language while being trained to be teachers of the language. The Japan Foundation provided me with opportunities to travel to Japan for long and short term teacher training programmes. This was a very tough period in my life, as it was extremely hard to live away from my family. It would not be wrong to say that without my Japanese friends and colleagues my endeavor would not have been a success story of which I am proud of today. My Japanese friends were always there supporting me, in every step of the way. And just as I am attached to Japan, I learned that my Japanese friends who were on similar exchange programmes to Maldives, never forgot Maldives even after completing their tenure; They always look forward to the events organized by the Embassy of Maldives in Japan so that they could reconnect with Maldives in someway, get together and show off their great Dhivehi language skills picked up during their stay in the Maldives.

I happened to be in Japan for a short-term training in 2011 when the unfortunate Great Tohoku Earthquake and Tsunami struck the country. It was one of the scariest moments of my life, but what
stayed with me after the incident was not the fear, but the concern and care shown by the Japanese authorities, towards our safety, how they prioritized our well-being over themselves, and their dedication to swiftly send overseas students back to their home countries to lessen their exposure to the disaster. In 2013, as a supervisor of Maldivian participants of Kizuna Project, I was fortunate to go back to Japan and witness the relentless effort of Japanese people in recovery of 2011 earthquake and tsunami.

In the journey of life with its ups and downs, we meet many people along the way and some become friends and the others, friends like family. Distance is just a word now, technology now enables us to keep in touch despite the busy schedules, time constraints and the distance. Our friends are just a snap, a wall post, a text message away. A simple gesture is enough to know that we are not alone and our friends are there for each other. Diplomatic relations between Maldives and Japan was established back in the late sixties. Over the years, the good relationship and mutual cooperation between the two countries have strengthened. Today, Japan is one of the biggest bilateral donor of Maldives. This year we mark the 50th anniversary of Japan - Maldives diplomatic relations. Even though international relations between countries are traditionally conducted by government officials and diplomats, the people-to-people contact often goes unnoticed. The Japanese and Maldivian example of friendship showcases the importance of having countries connected both at a diplomatic level and at an individual citizen to citizen level, to effectively maintain a strong and lasting relationship between any two distinct countries.

Our countries have established a never breaking bond between its citizens. Programmes like, Japan-East Asia Network of Exchange for Students and Youths (JENESYS), KIZUNA (bond) Project, APCC and JOCV provide the opportunities for citizens from both the countries to be directly involved and participate in societal, arts and cultural exchange activities further strengthening the bond. Despite the difference in the culture, way of life, an effortless camaraderie exists between the Maldivians and the Japanese. It would not be wrong to say that the relationship between the ordinary citizens of the countries, make the foundation for a strong lasting bilateral relationship.