

Reconstruction Agency

Award Ceremony for the Japanese Essay Competition for

Non-Japanese Nationals on the Theme of “The Fukushima in My Heart”

December 22, 2023

Date & Time: Monday, December 4, 2023

Venue: Reconstruction Agency Press Conference Room

Best Essay Prize Presented to Ms. Eranga Lakmini Gunasinghe (Sri Lanka)

“Thank you, Fukushima, for giving me a dream!”

Participation of Nine Award Winners in a Tour to Experience Fukushima’s Culture and
Survey the Current Status of Disaster Recovery

The Reconstruction Agency hosted a Japanese essay competition for non-Japanese nationals on the theme of “The Fukushima in My Heart” and presented awards to the top 10 essays, including the essay that won the Best Essay Prize, in an award ceremony held in the press conference room of the Reconstruction Agency on Monday, December 4, 2023.

By encouraging worldwide students of the Japanese language to write an essay in Japanese, the competition aimed to deepen their understanding of the current status of Fukushima’s recovery from the nuclear disaster of 2011, as well as the prefecture’s safety and attractions, among other aspects, and to ultimately dispel any unfounded rumors and misconceptions.

The call for entries ran from July 10 to October 10, and received a strong response, resulting in 878 entries from 31 countries and regions, including Japan. The Best Essay Prize (Minister for Reconstruction Prize) went to Ms. Eranga Lakmini Gunasinghe, a student in Sri Lanka who, in her essay titled “Thank you, Fukushima, for giving me a dream!”, fervently expressed her fascination with Fukushima that she came to hold through her encounter with a Japanese language instructor from the prefecture. Prior to the ceremony, Ms. Gunasinghe and eight other award winners (excluding one member who could not participate for personal reasons) also participated in an observation tour that took them to the Hamadori area in eastern Fukushima over the weekend of December 2 and 3. There, they spent two days visiting the remains of the earthquake disaster and reconstructed facilities, in addition to experiencing the local food culture and attractions while interacting with the local people. (Details of the tour are provided on pages 3 to 5 of this press release.)

The award ceremony was held at the Reconstruction Agency on December 4, the day following the tour. As the winner of the Best Essay Prize (Minister for Reconstruction Prize), Ms. Gunasinghe delivered a speech representing all the other winners of the competition. She spoke about her admiration and exposure to Fukushima, saying, “After my encounter with my Japanese language teacher in Sri Lanka, hearing stories about Fukushima from him has made me want to see Fukushima with my own eyes. Before coming here, I gained much courage and strength from viewing the Fukushima Waraji Festival and the Fukushima Ekiden Race on video. The Fukushima that I experienced in person was a wonderful place. I was moved by the sight of the

stricken area undergoing a recovery after the Great East Japan Earthquake.” Ms. Gunasinghe also conveyed words of support to the people of Fukushima, saying, “We will each go our own way after leaving Japan, but our hearts will remain as one. No matter how far away we may be, we will always think warmly of Fukushima. I will forever cheer for the heavenly land of Fukushima, which has given me a dream.”

Minister for Reconstruction Shinako Tsuchiya addressed all award winners and thanked them for their passionate thoughts and feelings of support for Fukushima’s reconstruction, as they so clearly expressed in their essays. She added further, “I hope you will share this experience with family, friends, and as many people as possible and give a further boost to the reconstruction of Fukushima,” and communicated her expectations of having increasing numbers of people throughout the world express their mutual support.

[Overview of the Award Ceremony]

- Date & time Monday, December 4, 2023, 14:00 – 14:20
- Venue Reconstruction Agency press conference room (6th floor, Central Government Building No. 4, 3-1-1 Kasumigaseki, Chiyoda-ku, Tokyo)
- Presenters Shinako Tsuchiya, Minister for Reconstruction and Minister in Charge of Comprehensive Policy Coordination for Revival from the Nuclear Accident at Fukushima
Masaaki Suzuki, Vice-Governor of Fukushima Prefecture
Kohji Oikawa, Chairman, Specified NPO Japanese Language Speech Association
Aki Sato, Representative of HITOkumalab
Noboru Takamura, Director of the Great East Japan Earthquake and Nuclear Disaster Memorial Museum
William McMichael, Associate Professor and Assistant Director of the International Center at Fukushima University

[Award Winners and Titles of Their Essays]

Best Essay Prize (Minister for Reconstruction Prize)

Eranga Lakmini Gunasinghe (Sri Lanka, age 23, student)
“Thank you, Fukushima, for giving me a dream!”

Fukushima Prefecture Governor’s Prize

Obasi Joseph Effiom (Nigeria, age 24, student)
“Fukushima in my heart”

Outstanding Essay Prize

Tenorio Molina Jose Humberto (Mexico, age 26, student)
“Bonds between Mexico and Fukushima”
Adriana Anna Igorivna Nazarko (USA, age 25, working adult)
“Fall seven times, get up eight times”
Kludia Brestenska (Slovakia, age 23, student)
“The fruit of our efforts”

Honorable mention

Hans Alexander Razo Urias (Mexico, age 24, student)
“Fukushima, a place of hope”
Chen-Jung Lee (Taiwan, age 22, student)
“The future of Fukushima that I believe in”

Syu (China, age 47, working adult)

“The Fukushima in my heart”

Yun-Jia Kuo (Taiwan, age 20, student)

“What Fukushima—blessed island—means to me”

Deyu Bao (China, age 41, working adult) *Nonparticipation in the ceremony and tour

“Fukushima, island of happiness: Happiness will come by bringing our hearts together”

Invitational Observation Tour for Award Winners

A two-day tour that transformed “the Fukushima in one’s heart” from a world of videos and imagination into reality

Nine award winners of the Japanese Essay Competition for non-Japanese nationals on the theme of “The Fukushima in my heart” were invited on an observation tour of Fukushima over the weekend of December 2 and 3, 2023 (excluding one member who could not participate for personal reasons). In addition to providing an opportunity for them to directly experience the attractions of Fukushima, including its foods and culture, while enjoying exchanges with local people, the tour also aimed to provide knowledge of the situation in Fukushima as it undergoes reconstruction from the overwhelming damage it suffered in the Great East Japan Earthquake of 2011.

The tour took the nine-member group to the Hamadori area on the coast of the Pacific Ocean in eastern Fukushima. In the wake of the Great East Japan Earthquake, the area suffered devastating earthquake and tsunami damage. This was also where many residents had to evacuate their familiar homes following the accident at Tokyo Electric Power Company’s Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant. Upon arriving in Iwaki City, Fukushima from Tokyo, the group enjoyed local seafood and vegetables for lunch and then spent the afternoon visiting the Environmental Aquarium Aquamarine Fukushima and Iwaki Lalamew, a center of tourism and local products. That evening, they experienced sushi-making. One participant admitted having been concerned regarding Fukushima’s marine products on account of information based on preconceptions, but noted that the sincere and cheerful hospitality of the local people dispelled any such worries. With a smile, the participant took delight in eating self-made sushi for the very first time.

On the second day of the tour, the group visited the National Training Center J Village in Naraha Town, then going on to the Great East Japan Earthquake and Nuclear Disaster Memorial Museum in Futaba Town and the disaster remains of Ukedo Elementary School in Namie Town, where local guides shared stories about when the earthquake struck and the reconstruction process that continues to this day. At night, they experienced Matsukawaura’s “Hamayaki” tradition of eating freshly charcoal-grilled flatfish and other seafood caught off the coast of Fukushima. A participant was heard saying that “the Fukushima in my heart,” which had been no more than a world of videos and imagination until now, became a reality, noting, “I was struck by the warm hearts and hard-working reconstruction efforts of the people of Fukushima, and will definitely tell everyone about this trip when I return to my country.”

[Day 1] Saturday, December 2

The group’s first meal in Fukushima featured fresh, local seafood for grilled fish or sashimi. Some participants said they “had some concerns [about local seafood] before learning about Fukushima” because of the discharge of ALPS-treated water into the sea accompanying the decommissioning of Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant. The discharge caused various speculations in many countries, as it contains the radioactive material tritium. However, after learning that proper steps are taken to measure the content of

radioactive substances in food items, they carefully observed how marine products are sold at the tourism and local product center Iwaki Lalamew and were able to verify their safety with their own eyes.

At Environmental Aquarium Aquamarine Fukushima, the group listened raptly to graphic descriptions of how some 150 visitors and staff desperately evacuated from the aquarium on the day of the earthquake disaster. They learned that at an aquarium, where the maintenance of the water through strict control of temperature, quality, and other such conditions is critical above everything else, the loss of power is a matter of life and death to the organisms on display. They also learned that there was much grief in having to prioritize which lives to save, when all lives are believed to be equal. A spontaneous round of applause occurred at the story of how the aquarium overcame its hardships and resumed business in a short amount of time with hopes of “delivering courage to the people of Fukushima.”

The group spent the night at the National Training Center J Village in Naraha Town and experienced sushi-making as an enjoyable learning program on Japanese food culture. Almost none had ever experienced making sushi, and some had never even eaten it before, so clad in white Happi-coat cooking uniforms, the group took to their rice and fish with earnest looks on their faces. After a hard-fought battle under the guidance of a chef in charge of Japanese foods, the participants made three splendid pieces of sushi and then thoroughly savored them. The paper hats they wore were given to them to take home, and some said with delight that they will wear them when they cook at home.

[Day 2] Sunday, December 3

National Training Center J Village, where the group stayed, sustained major damage in the Great East Japan Earthquake and finally resumed business after an interval of more than seven years. Thus, the tour set aside time for the participants to learn about its history. While the tsunami did not directly impact the facility, the group learned that large fissures had formed that prevented the use of the field and that the arena section of the facility had served as a safety shelter for people who had been evacuated from their homes. They also learned that the road to resuming business was long because the facility functioned as a base for operations in response to the accident at Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant. Nevertheless, the staff members pushed ahead with the restoration, driven by passionate thoughts and wishes.

At the Great East Japan Earthquake and Nuclear Disaster Memorial Museum, the group viewed a vast collection of videos and reference photos while hearing about how large numbers of people lost their lives or were forced to leave their hometowns due to the unprecedented disaster that combined a massive earthquake that recorded a seismic intensity of upper 6 (within Fukushima Prefecture), a surging tsunami, and an accident at Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant. The materials on display included many invaluable items, including memos written by disaster victims during their stressful evacuation periods. The participants said they could almost picture the hardships of the people who fell victim to the disaster and pledged their support of Fukushima from the bottom of their hearts no matter how long the recovery may take.

Ukedo Elementary School in Namie Town was another facility that was struck by the tsunami and left in ruins, but all pupils and teachers who were in school that day were able to evacuate to safety with not one life lost. Its story is considered a miracle and is being passed down today as a “miracle school.” Atop the hill to where the children ran for their lives trying to escape the tsunami that was closing in on them, a murmur arose from the participants expressing their astonishment that the children were actually able to scramble up the hill. They then gazed down with expressions full of sadness at the school building, which had somehow retained its framework but with its exterior walls and water pipes collapsed and bent by the massive force of the tsunami. The sight of a fallen signboard prepared for the graduation ceremony that was not to be only intensified their sadness.

On the night of the second day of the tour, the group experienced “Hamayaki” in the Matsukawaura district in Soma Town. While the tradition of enjoying fresh local seafood such as flatfish and vegetables grilled over charcoal had been kept alive by travel inns in Matsukawaura, the lively sights of people enjoying Hamayaki

