



CAMPAIGN 2000
for the Asian and Pacific Decade
of Disabled Persons, 1993 - 2002

Keynote Speech

Of

Mr. Eita Yashiro

Former Minister of Posts and
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[Keynote Speech for RNN Campaign]

Eita Yashiro, Former Minister of Posts and Telecommunications of Japan

RNN participants, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Up to this day when the 20th century's final conference is thus being held, the campaigns have been run in various countries in the Asia-Pacific region starting from the one held in Okinawa, Japan in 1993, with fruitful discussions under each subject. First I would like to extend my respect for all the parties concerned who have been involved in putting the campaigns into place.

Each of us is destined at heaven's command. I feel grateful anew to God for endowing me with life as a person with disabilities in such a precious time.

I started my new life as a person with disabilities in 1973. Two years later, the Declaration on the Rights of Disabled Persons was adopted by the United Nations in 1975, placing the issue of persons with disabilities on top of the agenda. Since 1977 when I set my face toward politics, I have positively taken up the issue in the arena of Japanese politics as one of the representatives of persons with disabilities who are trying to embody the Declaration. Back then, the Diet Building was too inaccessible for wheelchairs. In other words, it was nothing but a huge architecture full of stairways. Although "barrier-free" is eventually becoming a universal word nowadays, persons with disabilities in those days were so isolated in society that the issue concerning them was left off-street and quite alien to the political agenda. I think that when I became a member of the Diet, the first step was taken toward "freedom from barriers" for persons with disabilities, including alteration to the Diet Building to make it barrier-free.

I used to say in my speech, "Persons with disabilities are doubly disadvantaged: to overcome their own disabilities and to get over social barriers". Also I loudly exclaimed the idea of normalization, saying, "Human society is at peace when it includes a certain percentage of persons with disabilities, and a country where they can play an active role together with those without disabilities is truly a big power and normal human society." From then onward in Japan, political attention started to be paid to improvement of welfare for persons with disabilities, and they themselves initiated a movement every here and there to speak out the reality in their own voice.

Persons with disabilities, in cooperation with each other, positively carried out investigation by themselves: they ran campaigns to find out whether wheelchairs could get on and off at every railway station; they examined whether public establishments were designed so that persons with disabilities enter them easily; and they pointed out defects in administrative services. It is a matter of course that we involved Rehabilitation International (RI) and other experts who act in concert with us to organize symposia and campaign events almost everywhere and everyday, and made the most of media to make an appeal.

The United Nations designated 1981 as the International Year of Disabled Persons and proclaimed the 10 years beginning in 1983 as the United Nations Decade of Disabled Persons. Thus appealing the issue of persons with disabilities to the public began to form a wind-swift or tornadic movement all over the world. And the theme of the Decade of Disabled Persons was "full participation and equality."

Before then, the situation may have been no better than "incomplete or no participation and inequality" in society. The theme of the Decade gave further impetus to my political activities. I took part in the formation of the Disabled Peoples' International (DPI), an organization for and by persons with disabilities themselves. I made efforts for 15 years as chairperson of the Asia-Pacific Block to exchange information with comrades in the region, promote bilateral cooperation and bring up leaders of persons with disabilities, under the slogan of "welfare diplomacy" focusing on the region, procuring the support of the Japanese Government. Former Senator Narong and I have been friends for nearly 20 years. Getting

acquainted with such comrades enabled me to witness a lot of cases where new policies were enacted into law, as a result of suggestions presented by persons with disabilities in the Asia-Pacific region. This is exactly the realization of DPI's slogan "Voice of Our Own". However, it does not seem that persons with disabilities alone can bring everything into reality toward changes we expect.

Unless persons with disabilities, personal assistants, experts and ordinary citizens become as single-minded as the participants here at the RNN campaign meeting, it is impossible to achieve the true "full participation and equality." I believe that only when organizations of persons with disabilities themselves and those of experts such as RI work together hand in hand, will it lead to building of "human society for all", that is, "normalization" society.

The theme of the RNN campaign this time is "Breaking Barriers in society." The Asia-Pacific region varies in race, manners and customs, ideology, culture, life style, history, and language. Therefore, even if there is any difficulty, we should make efforts to explore the region's own way that is different from the mature, Western-style one in preparation for the barrier-free era in the 21st century.

At the end of the United Nations Decade of Disabled Persons in 1992, we called for the Asian and Pacific Decade of Disabled Persons as a new onset for the region, and the proposal was adopted at ESCAP Beijing Conference in 1992. Now that we are approaching the end of the Decade, I would like to express my gratitude for the assistance that Mr. Deng Pufang gave us with the setting of the Decade.

But please look at the situation, everyone. The Asian and Pacific Decade of Disabled Persons fell on the age of economic upheaval in Asia. It was also a decade of bitter hardships when we could not even sow the seeds of welfare for persons with disabilities due to the stagnant economy in every country, even though we tried to make flowers bloom. Also in Japan, the severe economic conditions cast a shadow on the progress in welfare for persons with disabilities. Considering these circumstances, I feel reluctant to beam a welcome to the finale in 2002. If possible, I would like you to discuss extension of the Decade at this campaign meeting and approach ESCAP and each country to carry on with "the 2nd Asian and Pacific Decade of Disabled Persons" from 2003 to 2012. What do you think?

The Japanese Government will consent to the idea, of course. I am determined to work for that. I am not sure I will be alive then, but I hope I will be more than likely to have breath until 2012 at the mercy of God.

We are going to enter the 21st century next year and there are only 19 days left in this year. However, let me put forth a proposal to define the year of 2003 as the beginning of our 21st century. Year 2002 shall be the last year of our 20th century. I would like to carry forward a massive campaign to eliminate "barriers in society", making the year of 2003 mark a new beginning of "the 21st century for all." Here, my dear comrades, I am pleased to inform you that we are going to invite all persons with disabilities in the world to Japan in 2002, the last year of our 20th century. This may be the latest, astonishing news. We, persons with disabilities and all concerned in Japan, are now planning to organize the International Forum on Disabilities to Mark the End Year of the Asian and Pacific Decade of Disabled Persons in Japan in 2002. First, a conference will be held in Japan as a goal of this RNN campaign; second, the Sixth World Assembly of DPI will be organized in Sapporo, Japan; third, RI Asia and Pacific Regional Conference will be also held in Osaka, Japan; and fourth, we are planning to organize a high-level meeting attended by officials in charge of welfare of 52 ESCAP member countries and areas and a conference of persons with disabilities in Japan as general accounts of the Asian and Pacific Decade of Disabled Persons.

The executive committee for the events was just set up on the 6th of December, finally succeeding in organizing political support with all Diet members of Japan involved, headed by Former Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto. The committee is composed of all persons with disabilities and related bodies and I was nominated as chairperson. I hope Japan will hold the last celebration in the 20th century for "our advocacy", "realization of full participation and equality", "21st century plan for elimination of barriers in society", and so on, and we can

embark on a new era of "our 21st century" in 2003. What do you think? Incidentally, the project to construct a memorial center for the Asian and Pacific Decade of Disabled Persons in Thailand is being carried forward surely and steadily by the Thai and Japanese governments in cooperation.

The new century is the age of information. I would like Bangkok to be the base for the transmission of information on measures for persons with disabilities in the Asia-Pacific region with the aim of networking in Asia, facilitating interaction with other parts of the world, and further networking worldwide. In the 21st century, our society will be in the age of IT and communications. Information and communication technology is a very convenience device for our daily activity.

There are 6 billion people living in congestion on the earth, a small planet, and two thirds of them are residents of the Asia-Pacific region. In the 21st century, the region will take a leading part in all aspects of the world such as economy and welfare. Let us call for and build up a strong and solid tie of solidarity hand in hand, across national boundaries, and across the type of disabilities.

Thank you very much for your kind attention.

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