

Speech by Johan Cels

Good afternoon, everyone – a very warm welcome to everyone this afternoon for this symposium commemorating the 60th anniversary of the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees. But even more so, we are also commemorating the 30th anniversary of Japan's accession to this convention.

Over the last 30 years, Japan's asylum and refugee policy has undergone many changes, ranging from the Indochinese refugees who came first to Japan to presently where Japan is the first country in Asia having a resettlement program. I think these are very important achievements which are not only important here for Japan but also in a much wider regional context. It is very important for us to look at these achievements but also to look at what some of the lessons are and how we can learn and use them towards the future.

This symposium is part of a larger process. This large process is linked to the 60th anniversary of the 1951 Convention. And that process will culminate in ministerial meetings which will take place on 7th and 8th of December in Geneva. And already more than 50 countries will be represented at the ministerial level. We also hope that Japan will be participating at a ministerial level. But in this part of the process leading up to the statements, to the pledges of Japan to the ministerial conference, we have organized a number of consultations. We have consulted with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, with the Ministry of Justice, but also very importantly, with parliamentarians, as well as with the civil society, and most importantly with the refugees themselves to see what their views are on what the 60th anniversary means and to look towards the future.

We hope, during the presentations of the first part of the session, that we have some ideas and suggestions for possible pledges from our different stakeholders being represented today. We are very pleased to have the Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Vice Minister of Justice, Mrs. Ogata together with Mr. Guterres, as well as the NGO community and the refugees to join us this afternoon.

The second part of the symposium will focus more towards the future and then look at the tragic events that confronted Japan in March this year. Because of the earthquake, because of the tsunami, more than half a million Japanese people were displaced. This brought us the lessons that at any point in time, any of us can be displaced. That is also a very important lesson as we more and more face natural disasters which are forcing hundreds of thousands, even millions of people, to be displaced possibly in the future. And there, the question is “what is the role that Japan can play?” And “how can Japan contribute to try to prevent and to address some of these issues?” I think it will be a very stimulating discussion and a lot of interactions – also hopefully with the audience this afternoon. And hopefully, it will also inspire us to even further enhance protection here in Japan but also worldwide through Japan's humanitarian policy, foreign policy and development policy.

This symposium would not have been possible without the very strong support of many people, and I really would like to particularly express our deep appreciation to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, to the Ministry of Justice, to JICA - who are co-organizers of this symposium, but as well as to the many supporters. Just to name a few, Japan for UNHCR – our national association, Mainichi Newspapers, several other media outlets, as well as the NGO community and again also the refugee community. I really would like to thank you again for joining us this afternoon, and I really hope that the discussions will inspire you to do even more and to even more engage, on behalf of people who are much less fortunate than us. Thank you very much.