

**Speech by Prime Minister Yves Leterme For the Belgium-Japan Association & Chamber of
Commerce
February Tuesday 2nd, 13h.
Hotel Metropole, Brouckèreplein, 1000 Brussels**

Excellency,
Mr. President,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

If the possession of rich natural resources was a condition for national wealth, Japan and Belgium would be poor countries, and large parts of Africa would be extremely wealthy. But clearly, things do not work that way. It is well known that Japan is the second economy in the world. Belgium, for its part, ranks fourteenth in the world in terms of Gross National Product per capita, twentieth in GNP in absolute figures, and twelfth in value of its exports.

We owe the relative positions of our densely populated countries to investment in the most precious asset any country has, its people. We owe it to investment in education, in learning, in innovation.

Especially in these difficult times, it cannot be emphasized enough that for companies small and large, the members of their work force are to be considered as an asset rather than as a cost. And that investment in their employee's life long learning is investment in future success.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I was glad to see that Belgium ranks as the most globalised country worldwide in the study you presented this morning, a study which compares the business climate of Belgium and its neighbours. Among our principal asset are, and I quote, "the availability of a highly educated and productive work force" and of a "multilingual work force". The study also mentions our favourable taxation policy towards foreign companies, our central location in the European Union, a market of half a billion people, and the presence in our capital of the European Institutions. Our relatively cheap rental prices come as an added bonus.

But apparently we are too modest about those achievements, because the study also shows that they are not well enough known internationally.

I am very glad that Japanese companies have discovered those assets many years ago. We very much value the presence of 220 Japanese companies in Belgium, the more than 25.000 jobs they created, the investment of 2.2 billion dollar in 2008. We hope that they will continue to appreciate the business environment we offer, and that new companies will avail themselves of those opportunities.

On our side, we are working hard to simplify procedures for Japanese citizens wishing to work or to study in Belgium, and to reduce red tape.

After consultation with the Embassy of Japan and the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, the Office for Foreigners has just published a brochure on measures taken to facilitate and to expedite the delivery of working permits, medical certificates, and certificates of morality; and to simplify the arrangements for driving licenses.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Japan is so much more than one of the most important economic partners of Belgium. It is a country with which we have extremely good relations which we value very much. The close links between the Imperial House of Japan and the Royal House of Belgium contribute to this warm relationship.

I myself have a deep interest and fondness for Japan since I first visited the country twenty years ago. I look forward to my visit in the beginning of April, when I will attend the festive opening of our new Embassy. I will use the occasion to convene a Diplomatic Conference in Tokyo which will bring together the Belgian Ambassadors in Asia, and also the economic representatives of our Regions.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Our countries differ in size but we can learn much from each other and cooperate fruitfully in many areas. We both face the challenge to remain at the top of technological innovation, as many other countries are rapidly catching up with our industrial and technological achievements. We both face the problems of maintaining our living standards and our highly developed social security systems in a competitive international environment and while our own population is getting older.

Japan has made great strides in environment friendly, energy saving production processes. Combining economic development with ecological responsibility is also a priority, not only for Belgium but of the European Union as a whole.

Now that the adoption of the Lisbon Treaty has given the Union a stronger footing, I am confident that the European Union and Japan will find ways to act in close consultation on a wide variety of issues which confront us both, ranging from addressing climate change to sustainable development and energy generation. My government certainly will do everything in its power to contribute to the best possible EU-Japan relations.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Those who know me, know how attached I am to my hometown, Ieper. It is not one of the nine Belgian cities which are twinned with a Japanese city. But it has links with two cities whose names became tragically known in 1945, Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Ieper suffered terribly in the First World War, when it was almost wiped from the face of the earth and when its name was given to the terrible poison gas. The mayors of those three cities are very active in the world wide Mayors for Peace Movement. It makes for another strand in the rich fabric of the relations between our countries.

To conclude, Ladies and Gentlemen, I wish all of you, even if the month of January has passed and I am two days late, a very successful and prosperous year, with still closer links between our two countries.