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Giving thanks for U.S. support in wake of Japan earthquake

On the map, Florida is the furthestmost part of the United States from Japan, yet American servicemen and women now based in Tampa were in Japan to help us in a time of great need.

Friday marks the fifth anniversary of the **Great East Japan Earthquake**, when my nation was rocked by an earthquake followed by a tsunami that devastated the coastal areas of Tohoku and claimed many lives.

It also resulted in a major accident at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant.

“Tomodachi” is the Japanese word for friendship. The United Armed Forces undertook a joint effort with the Japanese Self Defense Forces, known as “Operation Tomodachi,” to provide emergency humanitarian relief.

At a recent reception held in the Tampa Bay area for U.S. servicemen and servicewomen who served in Japan, I was honored to meet Lt. Gen. William Beydler of the U.S. Marine Corps, who was based in Okinawa in 2011.

I was deeply moved by the story of how he and his men flew in by helicopters to the affected areas immediately after the earthquake, despite the threat of nuclear radiation. The bonds of friendship between our two countries are further strengthened through such a challenge.

Floridian youths also have had the opportunity to learn first-hand about the March 11 disaster through the JET Memorial Invitation Program, which was created in memory of Taylor Anderson and Montgomery Dickson, two English teachers in Japan who perished while trying to help children in their schools to safety.

Over the past five years, nine Florida high school students have visited the Tohoku region as part of this program, forging strong friendships with the survivors and sharing their stories when they return home.

Reconstruction is proceeding steadily. The Japanese Government established the Reconstruction Agency in 2012, and, apart from the regions affected by the nuclear power incident in Fukushima Prefecture, most of the infrastructure has been rebuilt.

The situation at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant is under control, and robots are being deployed to aid the process of decommissioning. Radiation doses in the air and in the sea have dramatically decreased, and only 7 percent of Fukushima Prefecture is still subject to evacuation.

The Japanese Government inspects agricultural products and seafood for radioactive materials based on the most stringent guidelines in the world. Only safe produce that has passed these stringent examinations is allowed onto the market. Fifteen countries have lifted the import restrictions on Japanese products.

Tohoku is welcoming visitors again. It is a wonderful place to discover Japanese food and award-winning sake. The area is a cherished travel destination with its many ski slopes and hot springs, as well as world-famous sites that are steeped in Japanese culture.

For the Japanese people, March 11 is a time to pray for the victims and their families. It also is an occasion to express our sincere gratitude to the tremendous outpouring of sympathy and support from the United States and other countries in the aftermath of the disaster.

We thank you once again.

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