

DIPLOMACY OF THE PEOPLE

H E George Hisaeda on trade, ties, his favourite place in Oman and more

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H E George Hisaeda, Ambassador of Japan to Oman, believes diplomacy is not exclusive to diplomats. "Grassroots or people-to-people diplomacy is increasingly important in the interconnected 'global village' of modernity," he says. At the helm of an embassy that is active throughout the year, his tenure in Muscat also marked the 40th anniversary of the establishment of ties between the two countries. As the year – likely his last in Oman – gathers momentum, H E Hisaeda spoke with *TheWeek* on events planned out for 2015, trade, ties and more.

Q Your personal reflection on the two Japanese hostages killed by Islamic State last month.

As soon as I received the news about two Japanese hostages being threatened with murder by ISIL, I assembled my staff, discussed our plan of action, and instructed them to do absolutely everything we should as an embassy.

I considered the highest priority was to save the lives of the two Japanese hostages as well as to protect Japanese citizens living in Oman, since ISIL announced that

they would directly target Japanese nationals. The embassy began collecting information, seeking close cooperation with the friendly Government of Oman, and briefing Japanese citizens regarding security matters. Soon after that, we received instructions from Tokyo to take actions which were mostly the same as I had anticipated.

The Government of Oman has been highly cooperative. On February 1, it released a statement condemning 'Daesh' and announcing solidarity with the Government of Japan. Although Japan was saddened by the murder of the two Japanese hostages, we deeply appreciate Oman's prompt reaction and cooperation, and I would like to thank His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said, the friendly government and citizens of Oman for standing with Japan during our darkest hours, as they did during the devastating Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011. We will never forget such friendship.

Q Will the beheadings further strengthen Japan's resolve of pacifism or will it bolster efforts

towards more active involvement in world, in particular Middle Eastern, issues?

Japan will never give in to terrorism, and expresses its full solidarity and cooperation with the international community in countering international terrorism. On February 17, Fumio Kishida, Japanese Minister for Foreign Affairs, announced the 'Three-Pillar Foreign Policy in Response to the Terrorist Incident Regarding the Murder of Japanese' which is:

- Strengthening counter-terrorism measures, including counter-terrorism capacity building assistance in the Middle East/Africa region (US\$15.5mn)
- Enhancing diplomacy towards stability and prosperity in the Middle East (including assistance of US\$200mn as Prime Minister Shinzo Abe announced and further expansion of humanitarian assistance)
- Assistance in Creating Societies Resilient to Radicalisation

Q Your tenure in Muscat is likely to come to an end this year. What would you consider the highlight

of your stay here?

The highlights of my tour of Oman are as follows:

- The official visit of PM Abe in 2014, when he met His Majesty the Sultan and the two governments issued a joint communique, which I have since worked hard to implement.
- The 40th anniversary of official diplomatic relations between Japan and Oman in 2012 and its plethora of celebratory events that I am proud to have organised.
- The *Hiroshima, City of Peace* exhibition in 2014, which was a dream come true for me. Holding this exhibition in Muscat was of great significance, as it is also a city of peace; Oman plays an important role in maintaining peace in the Middle East.
- The opening of the Japanese language course in Sultan Qaboos University is another longstanding dream and cherished achievement.

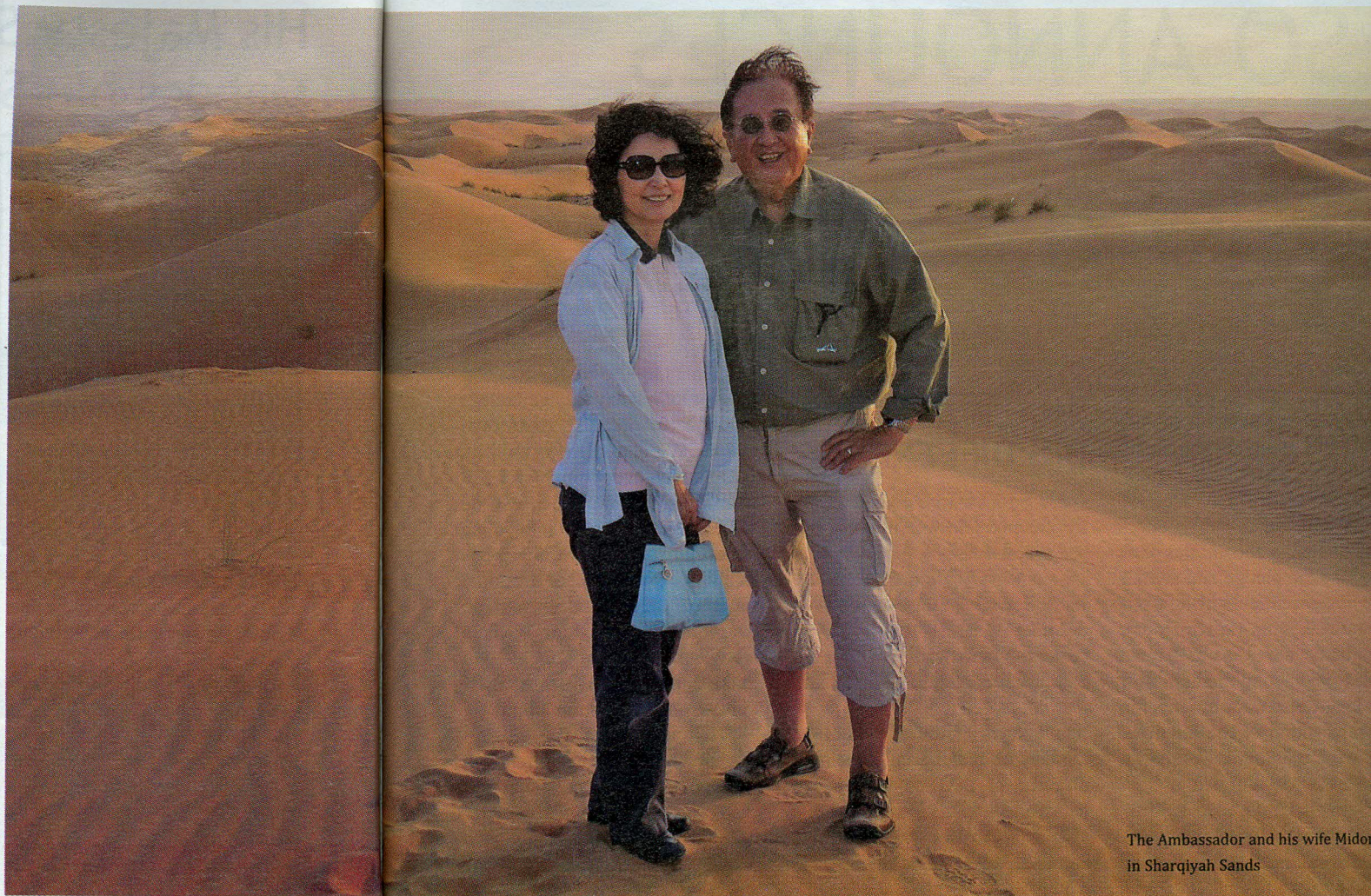
Another highlight was the 2012 Asian Qualifiers World Cup in Muscat. The president of the Japan Football Association, VIPs, Japanese fans and myself were all deeply moved by the unforgettable gentlemanly and gracious conduct displayed by the Omani fans when Japan won a close match. In stark contrast to experiences in many other countries, when leaving the stadium in their



H E Hisaeda with his wife and youngest daughter at Ras al Jinz

Is there any place in Oman that you are particularly fond of visiting?

I am drawn to places of historical heritage in Oman, but, as a nature lover, the place closest to my heart in this beautiful country is Ras al Jinz, which my wife and I have visited five times and taken visiting family members to. We have never failed to behold the remarkable spectacle of wild sea turtles laying eggs peacefully in their unspoiled, natural habitat under the starry sky with the waves gently lapping the shore. I would describe the place as a nature lover's heaven. Japanese culture holds a deep and enduring respect for nature, and all my friends back home become envious when they hear me talk about my experiences in Ras al Jinz.



The Ambassador and his wife Mido in Sharqiyah Sands

buses, the Japanese team and supporters received nothing but congratulatory cheers, waves, smiles and goodwill from Omani supporters. The president of Japan Football Association, who has attended many matches across the world, said that he had never seen anything like it before. The experience left everyone with the impression of Oman being a very special place indeed.

Q The Japanese Embassy, with you at the helm, has been very active in promoting ties. How much of this is driven by foreign policy directives set in Tokyo and how much can be attributed to your personal initiative?

During my tour of duty in Oman, I have made cultural diplomacy a priority. Some public events are driven by the government and a semi-governmental organisation called the Japan Foundation, for example the *Japanese Advertising Photography* and *Japanese Design 100* exhibitions. However, a great deal of the embassy's events are driven by personal initiative and made possible by generous sponsorship from both the Japanese and Omani private sector, for which I am always deeply grateful. I am particularly proud that I have drawn upon my personal network to bring many Japanese cultural ambassadors to Oman,

especially in 2012, which marked the 40th anniversary of official diplomatic relations between Japan and Oman.

Q What do you consider the best way to foster close ties between two nations?

I'm a great believer that diplomacy is not exclusive to diplomats. Grassroots or people-to-people diplomacy is increasingly important in the modern interconnected 'global village'.

Q Much has happened in Oman-Japan ties during your tenure. What are the plans for 2015?

The embassy's plans for 2015 include the Japanese Short Films Screening Festival and Lecture by a Japanese writer and director at the Oman Film Society and Oman Scientific College of Design, a *Winter Garden: The Exploration of the Micropop Imagination in Contemporary Japanese Art* exhibition organised by the embassy and Japan Foundation, in collaboration with the Omani Society for Fine Arts from March 8 to 19, and the annual Japan Day for Ladies on March 18 which will include a sushi-making demonstration, an *ikebana* or flower-arranging workshop, and the chance to be photographed in traditional Japanese attire while enjoying healthy green tea and other

ACTIVE EMBASSY

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H E George Hsaeda

Japanese refreshments.

This year will also see the signing of the Japan-Oman Bilateral Investment Agreement, following the signing of the Bilateral Tax Agreement during PM Abe's visit to Oman last year.

Q How does the volume of trade between the two countries in 2014 compare to figures of previous years?

Exports from Japan to Oman were around US\$2.96bn in 2012, \$3.13bn in 2013 and \$3.50bn in 2014. Imports from Oman to Japan were around \$5.60bn in 2012, \$5.63bn in 2013 and \$3.84bn in 2014. Ninety per cent of imports from Oman to Japan are crude oil and LNG, and in 2014 the volume dropped by around 30 per cent. According to reports from Japanese research centres and think tanks, this drop is mainly due to the weak

yen, which has pushed up the cost of imports. In addition, the number of 'eco-friendly' vehicles in Japan is on the rise, which require less petrol.

Japan is depending more on thermal power generation rather than nuclear power following the Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011. Thermal power plants use LNG for electricity generation, but according to a report, LNG imports for these did not increase in 2014 but remained almost at the same level as 2013.

The signing of the Japan-Oman Bilateral Investment Agreement is anticipated in 2015, and is expected to boost bilateral trade by attracting increased Japanese investment in Oman as a result of minimised conditions for investment in Oman as well as setting clear rules for cases of deterioration of the investment environment.

Q Considering the close ties and student exchange activities in place, will the number of scholarships offered annually by Japan to Omani students be reviewed in the near future?

Japan currently allocates three scholarship places to Oman annually; two for postgraduate study and one for teacher training. While it is a budgetary issue, I have tried to see this number rise. The embassy managed to increase the number of postgraduate scholarship places to three during my tenure, however, regrettably, two of the students had to pull out, so only one postgraduate student and one teacher training student went to Japan in 2014.

Q How big is the Japanese expat population in Oman? What kind of work/activities are they engaged in?

Currently, there are 136 Japanese expat in Oman, including babies. The majority are businessmen working in the oil and gas, automotive, and water and electricity plant or IPP and IWP sectors, and their families. We are a tight-knit community and enjoy events together such as Sports Day and New Year's Party. The embassy makes sure to keep the community briefed on developments. Of course, as ambassador to Oman, I would like to see this number rise.

AL NIMR SHOPPING EXHIBITION معرض النمر للتسوق

12 - 18
March 2015

Behind
Oman International
Exhibition Centre

Timings

10am - 1:30pm
4:30pm - 10pm

Friday: 4:30pm to 11pm

Sunday
15th March
only for families

Textiles

Gifts

Perfumes

Household

Shoes

Jewellery

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