



BUSINESS

Panamanian ambassador sees scope for growth in ties with Japan

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Panamanian Ambassador Ritter Diaz said Tuesday he has high hopes for stronger bilateral trade with Japan, and that he plans to target the aviation and maritime shipping sectors in pursuing it.

"We are expanding the scope of our relationship with Japan on different levels," said Diaz during a courtesy visit to The Japan Times.

"Panama is a leader in the shipping registry . . . and Japan is the number one customer," said Diaz, who took up his post in November. He expressed hope that the expanded Panama Canal will lure more investment from Japan. Revenue from the canal accounts for almost 10 percent of Panama's gross domestic product.



Work to deepen the canal and install wider locks is scheduled to be complete by the end of the year, allowing larger container ships to take the route — something Japanese shipping companies have expressed interest in.

Diaz, who also serves as Panama's Consul General in Tokyo, said Panama has seen steady economic growth despite the global financial crisis in 2008, and is now one of the fastest growing economies in Latin America.

He also hopes direct flights will begin between Panama and Tokyo, calling that initiative one of his major missions as ambassador. Diaz said an air link could become a bridge between the Americas and Asia and an alternative to connections that involve stopovers in the U.S.

"It might be the biggest challenge for me," he said calling the project a "revolution in the travel sector."

He said Panama has also been cooperating with Chiba University to adopt indoor farming technology — growing vegetables in stacked racks under controlled temperature and light. An unstable climate causes annual losses for Panamanian farmers.

Chiba University, which has been researching greenhouse cultivation, now offers a training program for Panamanian students.

Diaz praised Japan's cutting-edge technology, adding that he wants to bring Japanese railway skills and equipment to Latin America.

Diaz has lived in Japan since 1996, when he first came to study at Tsukuba University.