

# Japan dangles offer of aid to Africa with eye on UN seat

By David Pilling in Tokyo and Barney Jopson in Nairobi

Junichiro Koizumi, prime minister in 2003 when Japan last hosted an African gathering, managed to meet 23 African leaders virtually back to back. According to local media, Japan's most dynamic prime minister in years found the experience exhausting and said he would not want to repeat it.

This week, Yasuo Fukuda, at 71 a full 10 years older than Mr Koizumi was then, plans to go one better. Over three days he will hold 17 hours of bilateral talks with 45 African heads of state, prime ministers and vice-presidents during the fourth Tokyo International Conference on African Development (Ticad IV).

Mr Fukuda, who last week promised to double Japan's annual aid to Africa to \$1.8bn (£1.1bn, £900m), is seeking to spread the message that Japan can be a valuable partner in Africa.

At stake is more than merely the prestige that



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**Masato Kitera**  
Japan foreign ministry

Tokyo is hoping to gain as a proactive, responsible leader on the world stage.

Japan also hopes to court African leaders for their votes at the United Nations, important if it is to realise its long-held ambition of a permanent seat on the UN Security Council. Not least, it wants to maintain or increase access to the minerals, rare metals and oil that are growing scarcer – and more expensive – as rivals, particularly China and India, compete for the resources they need to industrialise.

In a speech last week on Asia's stellar growth, Mr Fukuda reminded his audience that, three decades ago, the annual gross domestic production of many Asian nations, at \$300-\$700 per capita, was on a par with that of African nations. Ghana's GDP at independence in 1957 was the same as South Korea's, now the world's 13th biggest economy, with a GDP per capita pushing \$20,000.

The underlying message was that, if only Africa could emulate Asia's development, much of which rode on the back of Japan's extraordi-

nary rise from wartime destruction, the continent could break the cycle of poverty that has become all too familiar.

Masato Kitera, director-general for African affairs at Japan's foreign ministry, says Ticad began in 1993 "just after the cold war at a time when the international community had started to forget about Africa".

The prospects for sustainable African development are perhaps better than they have been in years. This week's gathering, which begins tomorrow in Yokohama, comes after four years of annual growth in Africa above 5 per cent. Last year it notched up 5.9 per cent.

Mr Kitera says high commodity prices, largely fuelled by China's insatiable appetite, have provided Africa with a windfall that it should now use to promote development.

"We find that African leaders are delighted to talk about industrialisation," he says. "I have had many contacts with the [Japanese] private sector and I have been surprised that many companies have pinpointed African projects: 'My company is interested in this country and in this product.'"

But so far, Japan appears to have thought a lot more about Africa than African leaders have thought about Japan. By contrast, almost every leader from Khartoum to Lagos knows where he stands on China, which has embarked on a frantic round of diplomacy, promising to splash billions.

In 2006, African leaders responded by flocking to China's version of Ticad, where many spoke effusively about what they perceived as Beijing's no-strings-attached aid philosophy. Typical was the reaction in April of Shamsuddeen Usman, Nigeria's finance minister, to Beijing's offer of up to \$50bn in export guarantees. "The possibilities are endless," he told the Financial Times. "Which other country has made that kind of money available? Has the UK or America or any of them?"

Mr Kitera says: "If you have in mind the Chinese way, maybe the Japanese way is a little bit different. We are seeking a sustainable relationship with our African partners." The softly-softly approach is paying dividends, he insists. "We feel that it has succeeded in giving us a good image."

But he understands that leaders will not be coming all the way to Japan for mere chat about the merits of development philosophy. Alluding to Tokyo's decision to end its ban on aid to countries that have benefited from debt write-offs, he says: "Rather than debt cancellation, our African partners are now waiting for real money."



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