

View from Ambassador of Chile to Japan

# San Jose Mine: Japan Was There, All the Time

By *Patricio TORRES*Author *Patricio Torres*

When President Sebastián Piñera showed to the world on August 22 last year that a famous little piece of paper read “Estamos bien en el refugio los 33,” confirming that the 33 miners trapped in the San José Mine were alive, immense joy was felt across our country. Many Chileans took to the streets to celebrate, crying and praying in thanks after those 19 days of uncertainty.

Here in Japan, in our embassy and in the homes of the hundreds of Chileans who live in this country, the same joy and the same relief were felt. People celebrated. People cried. People prayed.

An even greater joy was felt later, on October 12, when the first miner was rescued and received by his family and by the president of Chile himself, right after stepping out of the now famous rescue capsule “Fenix.”

In Japan, we were also overwhelmed by joy and our celebration was even greater than in August now that we knew for sure that all the miners were safe. The traditional cry of “Chi-Chi-Chi Le-Le-Le...Viva Chile” still resounds at the embassy. Those were profoundly emotional days for us.

But what made our joy special was the fact that we were never alone in our worries, in our hope and in our joy. Since day one, we felt the warm voice of millions of Japanese telling us “we are here, we are with you, we feel like you.” To experience this was extraordinary for us as it had been a few months before when the Japanese also extended their helping hand after a terrible earthquake and *tsunami* hit Chile, causing loss of life and huge damage to our infrastructure.

Immediately after the mine accident became news, thousands of messages of solidarity poured in from every corner of Japan, from the Imperial Palace in Tokyo to the smallest village on a remote Japanese island. Undoubtedly, they helped us to keep hope and, most importantly, made us feel among the best of friends.

The telephones at the embassy never stopped ringing. Each call offered feelings of friendship and support. Hundreds and hundreds of gifts ranging from the simple *origami* folded-paper craft to state-of-the-art products that could make life easier for the miners were sent to us and, in turn, we sent them to the families and to those in

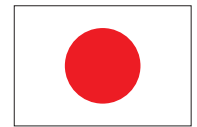
Photo: J-LoUPE



*Luis Urzua (center/left), the last of the 33 trapped miners rescued in northern Chile, thrusts his fist into the air as he is greeted by his family and President Sebastian Piñera (on his left).*



Chile



Japan

Photo: Kyodo News

charge of the rescue operations.

The immediate reaction from the Japanese government – the messages of support by its leaders as well as the significant help received from day one in equipment and supplies for the miners – was also extraordinary. During his recent visit to Japan to attend the APEC summit in Yokohama, President Sebastián Piñera often referred to the support and friendship that Chile always has received from Japan and its people.

The helping hand of Japanese companies, not only those with operations in Chile but many others, was remarkable and contributions from them were very important to the families and the rescue process itself.

In some cases, we could not help becoming ourselves emotional when we realized the intensity of the feelings of support and friendship. It could not have been otherwise when we looked at the marvelous drawings, letters and poems from very young schoolchildren as well as the letters, messages and gifts from senior citizens who shared with us, with intensity and all their soul, every moment of grief, hope and then joy.

Chile and Japan share a friendship established in the middle of the 19th century. This friendship is based on shared values such as respect for democracy and human rights, the rule of law and the promotion of freedom. We also share an important commercial partnership and many important Japanese companies have invested in our country, taking advantage of its able macroeconomic management, stable rules and business opportunities. These identities have brought our nations and peoples together and I have no doubt that they also played an important role in the extraordinary support and solidarity shown to the miners and their families.

The friendship and trust that exist between Chile and Japan are based on a long history of cooperation and friendly gestures in important moments of history. The participation in the historic naval “Battle of Tsushima” of the former Chilean warship Esmeralda as part of the victorious fleet of Admiral Heihachiro Togo is well remembered in Chile and Japan and has brought intense cooperation between the Chilean and Japanese navies. The cooperation of Japan in Chile’s development has been a key factor in the success of our industrial and trade policies in the last 100 years. The salmon industry, the shipping lines across the Pacific and the extraordinary development of our mineral wealth are quietly illustrative of the above, with bilateral trade reaching \$10 billion annually and cumulative Japanese investment in Chile amounting to \$3 billion.

As in the case of the miners, we will not forget the extraordinary solidarity of Japan and its people after the tremendous earthquake and *tsunami* that hit Chile in February 2007. This earthquake, which is among the five strongest recorded in history, and the *tsunami* that followed took the lives of almost 400 people and destroyed entire towns, ports and infrastructure in the three Chilean regions that were most affected. The immediate Japanese expressions of solidarity were followed by timely and valuable emergency assistance from the



Chilean Ambassador to Japan Patricio Torres (front/left) and his staff rejoice at the country’s embassy in Tokyo on TV news reports that the first of 33 trapped miners at the San Jose mine in northern Chile has been safely winched to the surface.

government, business and citizens. As always, Japan stood with Chile in times of distress.

The interest of Japanese people in the fate of the miners was clearly illustrated by the permanent coverage by Japanese TV and newspapers that carried daily updates on the rescue mission. It was quite an experience for us at the embassy to spend two full days with more than 40 Japanese journalists who covered the rescue from our offices in Tokyo’s Shiba Park. They were supportive and very professional, and were happy to celebrate the successful ending of the ordeal with Chilean wine and *empanadas*.

Among the many experiences during this time, I vividly remember receiving in my office an elderly couple who came to offer some money for the miners’ families, money which probably they also needed but had decided to donate. They confessed to me that watching the news of the rescue the night before had made them cry and that then they resolved to come the next day to our embassy to offer their support and share our joy. They lived quite far away from Tokyo and surely it was not easy at all for them to travel all the way to our embassy, but there they were, smiling and happy to be with us.

With their sincerity and generosity and their humble and charming words, they represented so well the feelings of millions and millions of Japanese during this ordeal. They were the perfect ambassadors conveying to us the warmth and friendship of all the people of Japan. What a privilege! We shall never forget them.

The key words of today in Japan seem to be “reform” and “change” and perhaps they should be as many countries, including my own, evolve and adapt to a new global environment. But what definitely does not need any change or any reform in Japan is the wonderful spirit of solidarity and immense kindness of its people. **JS**

*Patricio Torres is ambassador of Chile to Japan. Before assuming the post in July 2010, he held various positions in and outside Chile, including as ambassador of Chile to Malaysia in 2004-2008.*