Distinguished ladies and gentlemen, I am deeply grateful to have the opportunity to address you at this special event, commemorating the 30th anniversary of the founding of the Japan Exchange and Teaching Programme. I am also honoured that Jamaica, as one of the forty nations reflected in this year’s cohort of JET participants, has been chosen, along with Canada, to be represented by its Embassy at today’s gathering.

The JET Programme, as formulated by the Government of Japan, has as its primary aim, the promotion of grass-roots internationalisation across Japan. This is accomplished, as you know, via the distribution of JET participants throughout local government offices and at public education levels ranging from elementary to high school. The ultimate aim of this long standing and highly beneficial programme is to promote the building of international networks which will promote success in today’s global society.

This success, to which the official documentation of the Programme points, is really lifelong bridge building which only begins with language training. In the case of Jamaica, which is the third largest English speaking country in the Western Hemisphere, after the United States and Canada, the language skills which our representatives bring are the gift wrapping surrounding a much more substantive package.

That package is an effusive blend of dedication, enthusiasm, innovativeness, forthrightness and irrepressible joy which promote the early disintegration of barriers and the establishment of genuine friendships. Jamaican JETs, by and large, have developed warm and lasting relationships with the communities in which they have been placed and, in some instances, have actually decided to set down roots in Japan.

In two notable instances, Jamaican JET participants have transitioned into entertainment in Japan, after becoming proficient in Japanese, and have launched singing careers locally. One is a notable gospel singer in Sendai and the other a cabaret singer with a popular music album of all-Japanese hits produced by a major record label in Tokyo. Both have a national following.
By this avenue, these two people have expanded their JET experience in Japan in a way that benefits them, benefits the people of Japan, and contributes to the mutual goodwill which our countries enjoy.

A more recent and public example of the goodwill and synergies we share can also be found in the recent initiative of the Shitamachi Bobsleigh Project here in Tokyo. In that case, an Ota ward consortium, which has manufactured a bobsleigh based on cutting-edge design, has offered the sleigh to the Jamaican team for use in the upcoming 2018 Korea Winter Olympics.

In part, their enthusiasm for this partnership would have been fuelled by their recollection of the excitement the Jamaican Bobsleigh team created with their historic participation in the 1988 Calgary Winter Olympics, in Canada, and the 1998 Nagano Winter Olympics. But, I wouldn’t be surprised if the real decider for the members of the Shitamachi Bobsleigh Project was the movie about the Jamaica Bobsleigh Team, called ‘Cool Runnings’. Sometimes I get the impression that practically everyone I meet in Japan has seen that memorable film and I regularly hear the movie’s refrain : ‘Feel the rhythm, feel the rhyme, get on up, it’s Bobsled time!’

While not directly related, it is these synergies, along with the relationships formed through the JET Programme, which have drawn Japan and Jamaica closer together. Certainly, the fame of our Blue Mountain Coffee, reggae music and athletic successes has paved the way for acceptance of our JET participants in Japan. So, too have the reputations of cultural icons like Harry Belafonte, Bob Marley and Usain Bolt. God has, indeed, blessed us abundantly. As well, the 314 Jamaicans who’ve entered the programme over the past 16 years have, themselves, impacted the lives of co-workers, community members and students. This has occurred in ways which have drawn us closer together and deepened our understanding of each other.

However, please know that the ready-made friendship which we share and from which our JET representatives draw support, isn’t solely based upon sports, entertainment and commercial products. Even though Jamaica celebrated with Japan in the first Olympic silver medal you have ever won in the 4×100 metre relay in Rio, and loves anime, Japanese cuisine and electronics, our affinity has another foundation. This foundation has been laid by the successful collaboration our countries have enjoyed through our strong bilateral relationship of more than fifty two years.

Through this enduring friendship, we have engaged in numerous areas of technical and economic cooperation including energy, agriculture, fisheries, sanitation, health, infrastructure, education, disaster mitigation and, of course, language training.
Most recently, we have entered into the first sister regional agreement ever formalised between Japan and any Caribbean nation and we have enjoyed working closely with each other in multilateral fora, such as the Inter-American Development Bank and the United Nations. In many cases, we have been able to support each other in important votes taken before the General Assembly and even in matters related to the Security Council. These considerations bring me to the crucial point I wish to make to the JETs in the audience this afternoon.

Every JET participant present today comes from a country which has its own unique relationship with Japan. Consequently, for many of you, there will be an immediate point of reference on which you and your Japanese colleagues and students can connect and build. This is an encouraging platform from which to begin your journey as a JET but, in walking that journey, know that there are two irrefutable things at play.

The first is that you are representing your country wherever you are placed in Japan and, in some situations, you may be the only representative of your country which your community has ever encountered. Therefore, it’s imperative that you wear your distinct national personality with grace and sensitivity.

The second is that, since none of us can predict the future, you never know where you will end up in your career. Some of you may, indeed, become diplomats or represent your countries internationally, in other commercial, governmental or non-governmental capacities. So the friendships and understandings you forge now may be of great help to you, to your country or to Japan in the years to come. So, get in the habit of seeing yourselves for what you are, community-level ambassadors for your country who are planting seeds today which will reap significant harvests tomorrow.

For those of us who are diplomats by profession, we tend to operate within controlled environments, at somewhat of a remove from day to day life in the countries to which we’re posted. However, as JETs, you regularly interact with people from many walks of life in this fascinating country and are, thereby, gifted with the opportunity to positively impact the lives of many in your communities. As such, I encourage you to heartily embrace this responsibility to love the people of Japan, while burnishing your country’s good reputation. What a glorious way in which to promote success in today’s global society!

I thank you.