

# The Emperor’s 30-year Anniversary

## Exercising goodwill in symbolic role

Emperor Akihito marked the 30th year of his reign on Jan. 7, and the government will be holding a ceremony on Sunday to celebrate this milestone. On April 30, after three decades on the throne, the Emperor will be the first living Japanese monarch in about 200 years to step down.

As the eldest son of the late Emperor Hirohito, posthumously known as Emperor Showa, Emperor Akihito was born in Tokyo on Dec. 23, 1933. He studied at Gakushuin Primary School, but as World War II intensified, he was evacuated to Tochigi Prefecture.

After Japan’s defeat, he returned to Tokyo for school while learning English under the tutelage of Elizabeth Vining, an American author of children’s books.

In 1952, he entered Gakushuin University; the same year his coming-of-age ceremony and investiture as Crown Prince were conducted. The following year, the Emperor made his first overseas visit at age 19, touring 14 European countries, attending the coronation of Britain’s Queen Elizabeth and visiting the United States.

After finishing university in 1956, he started his official full-time duties. Three years later, he married Michiko Shoda, the daughter of the president of a flour milling company; their marriage was considered a symbol of a new, postwar Imperial family. Upon the death of his 87-year-old father in 1989, he ascended the throne, becoming Emperor.

Emperor Akihito has since performed official duties such as convening Diet sessions, overseeing attestation ceremonies of new administrations, presenting honorary awards, accepting foreign ambassadors and ministers, and hosting banquets for visiting heads of state.

“Ever since ascending to the throne, I have spent my days searching for what should be the role of the emperor, who is designated to be the symbol of the state by the Constitution. I intend to carry out



Emperor Akihito waves to well-wishers from the balcony of the Imperial Palace in Tokyo on Jan. 2, 2017. KYODO

my duties in that capacity and continue to contemplate this question as I perform my day-to-day duties until the day of my abdication,” he said in remarks released ahead of his 85th birthday.

Annually, the Imperial Couple has made at least three domestic trips to attend festivals, as well as welfare, cultural or industrial facilities to encourage local residents.

Promoting international friendship has been another important duty for the Emperor, as he and the Empress have visited other countries to meet heads of state and their communities. Since ascending the throne, the Imperial Couple has officially visited 28 countries, their trips separated from immediate profits to the nation.

“His majesty’s visits overseas are completely different from those made by prime ministers,” said one of his close aides. “Rather than securing short-term gains, they are aimed at goodwill between countries, which will be evaluated over the long course of history.”



Emperor Akihito and former Philippine President Benigno Aquino shake hands at Malacanang Palace in Manila on Jan. 27, 2016. It was his second visit to the Philippines after his first trip in 1962. KYODO

During his stay in Britain in 1953, he visited such places as a hospital, factories and a newspaper publisher. When he visited universities, he dined with professors and students.

As a symbol of the state, the Emperor has shown his diligence in meeting people both at home and abroad.

Upon his accession to the throne in 1989, the Emperor emphasized the great significance of exchanges between people, a stance he has since maintained.

“His stance to learn about the history and society of a country he visits and to sincerely respond to people he meets has not changed since his years as a crown prince,” his former aide said.

In his birthday remarks, noting that 2018 marked 150 years since the beginning of Japanese emigration overseas, the Emperor spoke of foreign nationals working in Japan:

“When the Empress and I visited the Philippines and Vietnam, we met individuals who were making efforts toward their goals of one day working in Japan. Bearing in mind that people of Japanese ancestry are living as active members of society with the help of the people in their respective countries, I hope that the Japanese people will be able to warmly welcome as members of our society those who come to Japan to work here. ... At the same time, the number of international visitors to Japan is increasing every year. It is my hope that these visitors will see Japan with their own eyes and deepen their understanding of our country, and that goodwill and friendship will be promoted between Japan and other countries.”

This article was compiled from Kyodo News articles, staff reports and the website of the Imperial Household Agency.



Emperor Akihito and Thailand's then-King Bhumibol Adulyadej in Bangkok in September 1991. KYODO

### Chronology of major events related to Emperor Akihito

The following is a timeline of Emperor Akihito's life and major events that have occurred throughout it.

- Dec. 23, 1933** — Born the eldest son of Emperor Hirohito and Empress Nagako, posthumously known as Emperor Showa and Empress Kojun.
- September 1939** — World War II begins.
- Aug. 15, 1945** — Emperor Hirohito's radio broadcast informing the nation of Japan's surrender.
- Nov. 10, 1952** — Becomes Crown Prince.
- April 10, 1959** — Marries Michiko Shoda, becoming the first crown prince, and later the first emperor, to marry a commoner.
- Feb. 23, 1960** — First son, later to become Crown Prince Naruhito, is born.
- Nov. 30, 1965** — Second son, later known as Prince Fumihito, is born.
- April 18, 1969** — Daughter, later known as Princess Sayako, is born.
- Jan. 7, 1989** — Ascends the throne upon the death of Emperor Showa.
- July–August 1995** — Visits memorial sites in Nagasaki, Hiroshima, Okinawa and Tokyo on the 50th anniversary of the end of World War II.
- Jan. 18, 2003** — Undergoes surgery to remove cancerous prostate gland.
- June 27–28, 2005** — Visits Saipan to honor the souls of war dead on the 60th anniversary of the end of World War II.
- Feb. 18, 2012** — Undergoes heart bypass surgery.
- April 8–9, 2015** — Visits Palau to pay tribute to war dead on the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II.
- Aug. 8, 2016** — Releases video message expressing desire to abdicate and pass the throne on to Crown Prince Naruhito.
- Dec. 23, 2018** — Celebrates 85th birthday.

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### Embassy of the Republic of Armenia

Congratulations Your Majesty for shaping this epoch of peace and prosperity for Japan. The people of Armenia thank you for the positive impact the Japan’s Heisei Era had on our country and the world.



H.E. Dr. Grant Pogosyan  
Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary



### Embassy of the Republic of Congo

On behalf of the President of the Republic of Congo, I would like to congratulate His Majesty the Emperor Akihito on His 30th Anniversary of Enthronement.



H.E. Mr. Félix Ngoma  
Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary



### Embassy of the Republic of Iraq

On behalf of the Iraqi Government and Iraqi people, I would like to extend my sincere and heartfelt congratulations to His Majesty the Emperor Akihito for 30 Years on the Chrysanthemum Throne



H.E. Mr. Khalil Ismail Al Mosawi  
Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary



### Embassy of the Kingdom of Morocco

I would like to convey my heartiest congratulations and best wishes on the occasion of His Majesty the Emperor's 30 Years on the Chrysanthemum Throne as well as success and prosperity to the people of Japan

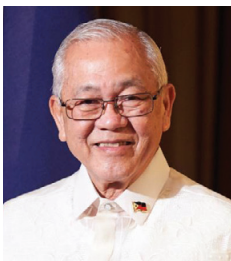


H.E. Mr. Rachad Bouhlal  
Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary



### Embassy of the Republic of the Philippines

On behalf of the Government and people of the Republic of the Philippines, I convey our most sincere congratulations to His Majesty the Emperor on his 30 years on the Chrysanthemum Throne.



H.E. JOSE C. LAUREL V  
Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary

### Taipei Economic and Cultural Representative Office in Japan

On behalf of the government and the people of the Republic of China (Taiwan), I convey our heartfelt congratulations to His Majesty the Emperor Akihito's 30 years on the Chrysanthemum Throne.



H.E. Mr. Frank C.T. Hsieh  
Representative



### Royal Thai Embassy in Tokyo

On behalf of the Thai people, it is our great honor to offer best wishes and sincerest congratulations on His Majesty the Emperor Akihito's 30 years on the Chrysanthemum Throne.



H.E. Mr. Bansarn Bunnag  
Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary



### Embassy of the Kingdom of Tonga

On behalf of His Majesty King Tupou VI and Her Majesty Queen Nanasipau'u, the Government and people of Tonga, we respectfully extend our congratulations to His Majesty Emperor Akihito for 30 years on the throne.



H.E. Lady Tania Laumanulupe 'o Talafolika Fusitu'a  
Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary



# The Emperor's 30-year Anniversary

## Imperial dedication to those in need

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Emperor Akihito has devoted his 30 years on the throne to defining his role as “symbol of the state,” a new status created under the postwar Constitution.

After 30 years, the 85-year-old Emperor's time on the throne is drawing to a close as he is scheduled to abdicate in April, fulfilling his initial desire to step down, which was made public in August 2016. During his three decades on the throne, his warm personal exchanges with former leprosy patients, those with Minamata disease and disabled individuals represent a major shift away from precedents set by his predecessors. Observers see his interactions as symbolic of the Emperor taking responsibility for Japan's historical discrimination against this particular demographic.

On Oct. 4, 2004, a high-speed boat carrying the Emperor and the Empress from Shodo Island back to Takamatsu, the capital of Kagawa Prefecture, stopped at a small island in the Seto Inland Sea to allow the couple to take a moment to wave at residents of a leprosy sanatorium.

Lining up on a pier, the residents of the state-run Seishoen sanatorium on Oshima Island were able to see the Imperial Couple, who could not visit the facility itself as large vessels are unable to dock at the island.

The Emperor and Empress had met some residents of the sanatorium in central Takamatsu two days earlier, but only a small group was able to take part in the session as many of the residents were too old to travel.

The brief stop was arranged by the Ehime prefectural government and the Imperial Household Agency in response to the Imperial Couple's wish to interact with the sanatorium's other members.

In 1907, the central government adopted an “isolation policy” that forced leprosy patients to live in sequestered facilities across the country. This policy lasted until 1996 when the anti-leprosy law was abolished.



Emperor Akihito and Empress Michiko kneel as they listen to evacuees at a school in Shimabara, Nagasaki Prefecture, after Mount Unzen erupted and killed 43 people in June 1991. KYODO

At the policy's peak in the 1950s, the government sent over 11,000 people to national sanatoriums.

As of 2014, the couple has visited all 14 of Japan's leprosy sanatoriums; their visits have taken place since their days as Crown Prince and Princess over the course of around half a century. Oshima Seishoen was the only facility they could not enter.

During the Takamatsu visit, the two listened to each individual resident and continued chatting with them beyond the allotted time, said 82-year-old Hiroshi Nomura, who took part in the meeting.

“I still cannot forget that when they were about to leave, Empress Michiko said, ‘Oh, it was so much fun,’” Nomura said.

The couple's welfare visits to children, the elderly and others — which total over 500 — reflect the Emperor's opinion that he “should not just think about the people in an abstract

manner, but relate to each person who is in a vulnerable position,” according to Shingo Haketa, 76, former chief of the Imperial Household Agency.

Those with Minamata disease at a welfare facility in Kumamoto Prefecture also recalled their meeting with the Emperor and Empress on Oct. 27, 2013, arranged in response to the Imperial Couple's wish to visit those affected.

The disease has been traced to mercury-tainted water fertilizer-maker Shin-Nippon Chisso Hiryo K.K., now Chisso Corp., dumped into Minamata Bay in the 1950s and 1960s.

Locals who consumed contaminated seafood developed paralysis in the hands and feet as well as a loss of sight. A number of infants were also born with birth defects after expectant mothers unknowingly ate tainted food.

Roughly 1,800 people in Kumamoto Prefecture and 500 people in Kagoshima Prefecture

have been diagnosed with Minamata disease. Of these individuals, about 350 are still alive and are an average of 78 years or older.

Yuji Kaneko, 63, and Kiyoko Kagata, 63, along with the head of the welfare facility Takeko Kato, met with the couple.

On the previous day, Kato was told that despite their tight schedule, the two wanted to meet individuals who have lived with Minamata disease since birth. The couple was visiting Kumamoto to attend a convention on marine environment and resource management.

With the help of Kato, Kaneko, whose speech is impaired due to the disease, told the Imperial Couple that his father died of Minamata disease before he was born. The Empress expressed her sympathies, saying, “Your mother must have faced hardships on her own, then.”

“I felt that they were trying to face the pain of patients, who have been tossed about by the state, as individual human beings,” said Kato.

Emperors in Japan, once considered divine figures, have not always had such personal interactions with the general populace; kneeling down to talk with members of the public was not the norm.

In 1991, the couple did just that, startling the public when they knelt down to speak to



Emperor Akihito bends down to speak with a resident of the state-run leprosy sanatorium Miyako Nanseien on Miyakojima Island in Okinawa Prefecture on Jan. 25, 2004. KYODO

people affected by a massive volcanic eruption in Nagasaki Prefecture.

The couple was actually continuing a practice they had started as Crown Prince and Princess, but some had assumed they would not continue it as Emperor and Empress.

Back in November 1986, the couple knelt while visiting a Tokyo evacuation center housing those who had fled the island of Izu Oshima after a volcanic eruption. Evacuees were seated on mattresses during the visit.

“I thought that this must be how a crown prince behaves,” said Haruo Koike, 80, who was there at the time.

A person who witnessed the couple lis-

tening to Koike's account of his evacuation said they appeared to be trying to keep their eyes at the same level as him and others they spoke to.

At a news conference in November 1999, the Emperor shared that he considers it an important duty of his and the Empress's to connect with the disabled, elderly, those affected by disasters and people dedicating themselves to others or society. “It is with such a thought that we visit welfare facilities and disaster areas. ... What we have tried to do as much as possible is to share our hearts with the people we meet at the facilities and disaster areas we visit,” he said.

Our Gratitude for His Majesty the Emperor's 30 Years



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H.E. Dr. Bashir Mohabbat  
*Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary*

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*Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary*

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**The French Embassy  
in Japan**

H.E. Mr. Laurent Pic  
*Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary*

EMBASSY OF THE  
UNITED ARAB EMIRATES  
TOKYO



**Embassy of  
the United Arab Emirates**

On behalf of the government and people of the UAE, I convey my heartiest congratulations to H.M. the Emperor on the Chrysanthemum Throne with sincere appreciation to his contribution to the world peace and bilateral relations.



H.E. Mr. Khaled Alameri  
*Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary*

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H.E. Mr. Frank Okyere  
*Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary*

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**The Royal Embassy of  
Saudi Arabia**

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**Embassy of  
the Republic of Zimbabwe**

H.E. Mr. Titus M.J. Abu-Basutu  
*Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary*

**ASEAN Committee  
in Tokyo  
(ACT)**

ACT extends its heartfelt congratulations to His Majesty the Emperor on the occasion of the 30th Anniversary of His Majesty's Ascension to the Chrysanthemum Throne.