

February 25, 2010

Venue: The Japan Institute of International Affairs

Dr. Maram Stern, Deputy Secretary General and Vice President of the World Jewish Congress (WJC)

Topic: “The Jewish Community at Present”

Born of a Jewish mother and father, I am a “classical Jew.” I was born in post-war Germany to parents who had survived the Holocaust. My mother is a Jew who experienced Auschwitz, and the Holocaust might be regarded as the greatest challenge we Jews have had to endure. The deep impact and scars remain to this day, and the experience is one deeply ingrained in the hearts of Jews. Had the Holocaust not occurred, the Jewish community would likely appear quite different than it does today.

The World Jewish Congress at which I serve as Vice President is an institution comprising Jewish communities and organizations in 80 countries in the world. Headed by a 27-member executive board and committee, the WJC gathers around twice each year to debate topics of common interest. Of the various issues concerning Jews that the WJC discusses, that of the greatest interest is Israel. I am a German citizen living in Belgium who votes in German elections and closely follows news about Germany in the papers, but Israel is extremely important to me. This could be said of other Jews as well. We may not always be in agreement on political issues, but there is no room for dispute on Israel’s need for security and peace. We consider an Israel at peace to be essential. In other words, Jews around the world see Israel as our heart, without which we cannot sustain our lives. Even if we do not live in Israel, even if we do not completely agree with Israel’s politics, there is no doubting the importance of Israel for us.

Antisemitism is a concern that persistently confronts us. Antisemitism is a reality, and not one likely to disappear in future. We regularly consider how best to counter antisemitism, and in this connection Iran has become our greatest source of anxiety in recent years. I simply cannot accept President Ahmadinejad’s rejection of Israel’s right to exist and his denial of the Holocaust. The statements of President Ahmadinejad are themselves problematic for Jews, and Iran’s attempts to exercise its influence on countries such as Venezuela are also troubling. His repeated remarks horrify us, and my mission is to get him to stop them. To that end, I need the cooperation of countries having leverage with

Iran. I ask that Japan use all of its influence on President Ahmadinejad to persuade him to cease making such remarks.

The world in which we live today is in the process of significant change. The emergence of President Obama in the US is one example of this. The steady march ahead of a new Europe, the EU, is another aspect of this new world; the EU's success was but a fantasy only two decades or so ago. China, too, has become a new China. Its presence at the Copenhagen climate change conference the other day would have been unimaginable previously, and the country continues to undergo dramatic transformation. Another sign of a changing world is the growth of Europe's Muslim community. Recent years have seen emerge from this community individuals who are hostile or aggressive towards Jews. For example, there was an attack on a Jew in Brussels by a Muslim following Friday prayer. That it remains so difficult to foster trust between the two communities is exceedingly regrettable, and we need to seek out some type of resolution.