

79th Biennial Conference (Opening)

29 November 2020

The Right Honorable Lord Mance, Honorable President Dr. Ward, distinguished members of the International Law Association and its Branches, distinguished participants, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a distinct privilege and pleasure for me to say a few words of welcome on behalf of the ILA Japan Branch at the Opening Plenary Session of the 79th Biennial Conference of the ILA, the 2020 Kyoto Conference. We had been looking forward to welcoming you in person to the historic city of Kyoto in August. However, the worldwide spread of covid-19 made that impossible. After close consultations with the ILA Headquarters and other Branches, the decision was made to go online a few months later in the year. Even so, the event is still called “the 2020 Kyoto Conference”.

Allow me to tell you a bit about the history of the Japan Branch which was founded in 1920. This year’s Closing Plenary Session will be held on December 13th, the very date on which the Japan Branch was founded 100 years ago. A British lawyer, Thomas Baty, was instrumental in establishing the Japan Branch. He was a legal advisor to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. The Japan Branch has steadily expanded its activities ever since and has contributed to the development of international law. It has grown to 332 members.

Back in 1964, the Japan Branch hosted the ILA’s Biennial Conference in Tokyo, Japan. We had planned to host the conference for a second time in 2014, that time in Kyoto. However, the earthquake and tsunami disaster of 2011 made that extremely difficult. As a result, the Biennial Conference in Kyoto was rescheduled for 2020 and the 2014 conference was held instead in Washington D.C. I take this opportunity to once again thank the American Branch for graciously hosting the 2014 conference in spite of short notice.

The main theme of the 79th Biennial Conference remains “Bridging for the Future”. The Kyoto Conference is intended to bridge the past, present and future while connecting the East, West, North and South. Japan’s fundamental foreign policy is devoted to establishing and strengthening the rule of law in international relations. I trust that the Kyoto Conference will contribute to promoting this goal.

The Committees and Study Groups are the main engines that carry out the substantive work of the ILA. With close collaboration with the Headquarters, this time 14 Committees and 5 Study Groups will meet also online in the two weeks between the Opening Plenary and the Closing Plenary. In addition, the Headquarters will host a series of Panels. Three of them will be specifically devoted to the work of selected young scholars, with December 9th designated as “Young Scholars Day”. I’m happy to report that 348 participants have already registered including 26 scholarship students. Holding these meetings online presented new challenges to all of us. I would like to recognize the tremendous efforts to meet them under the leadership of Professor Bodeau Livinec, Director of Studies of the ILA. I look forward to seeing the final reports and resolutions to be presented by several Committees for consideration and adoption by the Plenary. These documents will be the main products of the 2020 Kyoto Conference.

With the help of the ILA Headquarters and Branches concerned, the Japan Branch has made every effort to prepare for a fruitful Biennial Conference. One advantage of the online format is that it allows many people to participate from all over the world without requiring expensive international travel. On the other hand, it entails inevitably the problem of time differences. For instance, a convenient schedule for London and Kyoto is the middle of the night in some other places. To deal with that complication, we are making video recordings of all parts of Plenary sessions available so that participants can view them at convenience. This is based on the good suggestion of Lord Mance. Another positive aspect of going online is that it opens the doors of the ILA Biennial Conference, and even those of the ILA itself, to a wider range of participants, especially young scholars and practitioners.

For more than two years leading up to May 2020, the Japan Branch had spent a significant amount of time, as well as human and financial resources, preparing for the originally planned August Kyoto Conference in the usual in-person format. The unavoidable switch to the online format made much of that planning moot and created additional difficulties, especially in finance and conference organization. I would like to thank the ILA Headquarters and many Branches for kindly understanding these difficulties and offering various forms of help, including financial assistance. Their invaluable support has allowed the Japan Branch to go forward with the Conference and into the future.

We had planned to open the Kyoto Conference with a cultural performance, as was done in Sydney in 2018. However, with the move online, we had to cancel it. We also very much regret the loss of the opportunity to host ILA members, family, and guests from abroad in the beautiful city of Kyoto. I earnestly hope that another chance will arise for us to do so in the near future.

Shunji Yanai
President, ILA Japan Branch