

Tourism minister apologizes for gaffes

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New tourism minister Nariaki Nakayama wasted no time putting his foot in it. The day after stating that Japanese do not like foreigners and that the country is ethnically homogeneous, Nakayama apologized Friday and retracted his statements.

"I am sorry for having caused trouble to the people," the land, infrastructure, transport and tourism minister told a news conference. "I retract my remarks that I think fell too short (of an explanation) or went too far."

Nakayama, who took up his post on Wednesday, added that he had no intention of resigning to take responsibility for his remarks.

Nakayama's gaffe comes just ahead of the Oct. 1 launch of a tourism agency charged with drawing 10 million foreign visitors to the country by 2010.

A Lower House member from the Miyazaki No. 1 constituency, Nakayama made the comments during an interview Thursday with The Japan Times and



Apologetic: Tourism minister Nariaki Nakayama apologizes Friday in Tokyo for insensitive remarks he made Thursday. KYODO PHOTO

other news organizations.

Asked how more foreign travelers might be enticed to come to Japan in the face of opposition from some locals, Nakayama responded, "Definitely, (Japanese) do not like or desire foreigners."

He added that Japan is extremely inward-looking and "ethnically homogeneous."

However, he also said it is important for Japanese to open up the nation and their minds to welcome foreign travelers.

Nakayama is not the first politician to land in hot water for referring to Japan as a homogeneous nation. When in 1986 then Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone described Japan as a nation with a homogeneous race, he was met with a strong backlash mainly from the Ainu, an aboriginal people from north Japan.

In the same interview Thursday, Nakayama also blamed local residents, citing their lack of self-sacrifice, for the fitful expansion of Narita International Airport in Chiba Prefecture.

The construction of a second runway was long delayed by clashes with local landowners and their supporters.

The opponents of the airport expansion "do not have public spirit or willingness even to sacrifice themselves for the public," Nakayama said.

"Under such a selfish public tendency, the airport could not easily be expanded, which was very regrettable," Nakayama said. "In that sense, I envy somewhere like China."

He retracted these comments as well.

A political conservative, Nakayama is a champion of traditional Japanese culture.

In 2005, he was quoted as saying he was glad that the descriptions of "comfort women" — the wartime-era sex slaves — were removed from junior high

school history textbooks.

He also headed a group that angered China last year by claiming that the 1937 Nanjing Massacre was a fabrication.

Meanwhile, the opposition camp called the same day for Nakayama's dismissal.

Yukio Hatoyama, secretary general of the Democratic Party of Japan, called Nakayama's remarks on homogeneity Thursday extremely rude and told reporters he "needs to give up his post, not the remarks."

Information from Kyodo added

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