**Messages for LIGHT UP NIPPON**

In commemoration of the first anniversary of the Great East Japan Earthquake, in March of 2012 The Japan Foundation is pleased to host a website for a limited time that will collect messages of encouragement and fireworks illustrations created by an online drawing tool from all over the world for the residents of the Tohoku region. On the website, your personally designed virtual fireworks will be launched according to the time zone of your submission. We are also able to accept messages in many different languages, so please submit your entry today. (Submissions will be accepted up until March 31, 2012.)

[messagesforlightupnippon.jp/en/](http://messagesforlightupnippon.jp/en/)
On March 11, 2011, Japan was hit by an unprecedented earthquake and tsunami that caused devastating damage, bringing sorrow and hardship not only to the Tohoku region but also to the entire nation of Japan. LIGHT UP NIPPON is a fireworks display project that launched fireworks at 10 disaster-stricken areas simultaneously following the Great East Japan Earthquake. Traditionally, fireworks in Japan serve as a memorial to the victims and a symbol of hope and prayers for relief and recovery.

After overcoming many obstacles with strong commitment and sheer determination, the first fireworks event of this project took place on August 11, 2011, much to the delight and excitement of many people. This was made possible through the joint volunteer efforts of the LIGHT UP NIPPON Executive Committee comprised of local people from the respective disaster-stricken areas and young businesspeople from various organizations in Tokyo. The Japan Foundation has produced a documentary video for overseas viewing that includes the LIGHT UP NIPPON project, an effort made possible through the combined power of individuals from Japan’s younger generation.

Japan and Fireworks

Like many countries, Japan celebrates special occasions with fireworks, but it also has long held the belief that fireworks repose the spirits of the deceased and ward off bad luck. It is thought that gunpowder first made its way to Japan from Europe in the 16th century. In the beginning, it was used for military firearms and to make smoke signals. Firearms were developed for display purposes in the Edo Period, and the roots of fireworks festivals date back to 1733. In the year prior to this, many people died of famine and plague, so fireworks were set off to commemorate the dead and drive away disease. Around this time, specialist pyrotechnicians first came on the scene and competition arose to see who could create the biggest, most beautiful fireworks. The technology and artistic quality of fireworks continue to evolve to this day, and Japan’s fireworks are world-renowned for their sophistication.

In Japan, people observe a custom known as Obon in which the spirits of deceased family members and ancestors are welcomed back home once a year. A small bonfire is lit at the home entrance to guide the spirits back. A bonfire is also lit in the area where the spirits are believed to be returning to the spirit world (the most famous bonfire called Daimonji is in Kyoto). Typical traditions observed during the Obon season in different parts of Japan include releasing floating lanterns, to which one’s wishes and the names of deceased loved ones are attached, into a river or the sea; dances known as Bon-odori that include people wearing yuletide (summer kimono) dancing in rings several layers wide; and large fireworks displays. The fireworks are not only beautiful and dynamic but are also considered to be special in Japan for helping people to mourn the dead and reunite with family and friends in their hometowns.