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New Year's Address

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I wish you a happy New Year. While the COVID-19 pandemic has not yet come to an end, courts were able to play their roles last year thanks to individual court officials nationwide fulfilling their respective duties, and I would like to extend my heartfelt respect and appreciation to them. At the beginning of the first new year after assuming the post of the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, I have renewed my resolution to fulfill our heavy responsibilities with all my colleagues.

Needless to say anew, the most critical challenge faced by courts is the digitalization of judicial proceedings. One of the essences of digitalization resides in not only utilizing systems and data but also enhancing efficiency and reducing burdens in operations. In order to promote digitalization of judicial proceedings, it is necessary to fundamentally review judicial proceedings in total, with an aim to reduce the total burden on people involved in judicial proceedings (such as litigants, litigation representatives, and public prosecutors) and court officials, in addition to improving accessibility to courts and enhancing efficiency in creation, management, use and other handling of case records. Furthermore, considering the workload in reading case records on the

display screen, the reduction of the workload in reading statements and documentary evidence submitted to courts is an important issue that could affect the success of digitalization in judicial operations. It goes without saying that such review of the whole of judicial proceedings must lead to improving the quality of judicial services. It is desirable to tackle the trend of prolongation of proceedings in civil litigation, which has recently been pointed out, in the process of taking such review measures.

Reducing the operational burden on court officials and enabling them to engage in work with flexibility is beneficial from multiple perspectives, such as further enhancing courts' system for dealing with cases, including response to complex and difficult cases, encouraging judges and other officials to spend time for self-improvement and to elaborate and practice creative ideas toward solving disputes, and achieving work-life balance. These benefits will eventually lead to enhancing and strengthening the courts' function to solve disputes. I would like to emphasize again that rationalization and streamlining of judicial operations on the occasion of digitalization have such a positive meaning. It is also true that change of practices which have been employed over a long period of time is psychologically difficult. In this respect, digitalization will drastically change judicial operations and provide us with a rare opportunity to reconsider what judicial operations should be like from a new perspective.

With regard to civil litigation, in which digitalization has been making the best progress among court proceedings, proceedings to arrange issues and evidence are currently conducted using a web-conferencing system at courts nationwide, and along with this, web meetings to exchange opinions are actively held by judges and other officials nationwide. In these meetings, participants discuss a wide range of issues, including examples of the practice of conducting proceedings to arrange issues and evidence efficiently using the functions of the web-conferencing system and how to draft judgments using the results of these proceedings. Thus, these meetings accurately reflect the awareness of the issue above. As way to examine cases differs depending on facts of cases and individual characteristics of judges and parties, I hope that as many practices as possible that can be utilized by any judge will be shared among judges. Digitalization will be discussed sequentially for other proceedings beside civil litigation proceedings. From the perspective of reflecting digitalization in law amendment and system design, it is desired that an ideal form of digitalized proceedings should be discussed from an early stage.

Looking at courts as a whole, the length and breadth of experiences and the constraints on available time vary among court officials who are in charge of the same type of cases, and each court division should work for ensuring that court officials in the division can complement each other and share such experiences. In order to make this function work more effectively, it is beneficial to objectivize the part of the operations for which court officials with limited experiences or time feel a burden, and to share information among court officials, including solutions to reduce such a

burden by verbalizing, in some form, ways how experienced court officials deal with individual cases and manage total workload assigned to them. It is truly regrettable if the know-how acquired by some court officials through their years of experience was left unused "intangible cultural property." From the perspective of coping with the difficult task of fundamentally reviewing the whole judicial proceedings by gathering the knowledge of the court as a whole, such "inheritance of knowledge" has a significant meaning.

In carrying out system development toward digitalization, it is absolutely necessary to reflect the opinions and feelings of court officials who use the system. To this end, the Digital Transformation Office, which is in charge of system development, and court officials who engage in judicial proceedings at the forefront should exchange opinions frequently in an open manner. In particular, I hope that court officials who are young (at heart) will actively participate in these discussions, with the mind to make a new judicial system. On this occasion, it is also important to simplify and standardize operations to the greatest possible extent except for those subject to the exclusive authority of judges on trials and decisions on cases.

To conclude my new year's address, I hope that this year will be a good year for you all and that steady progress will be made in taking measures to realize new court proceedings.