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New Year's Address

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I wish you all a happy New Year.

Last year, we were thrilled as a nation with a series of positive news stories: the success of the Expo 2025 Osaka, Kansai, Japan; the Nobel Prizes awarded to Japanese scientists; and the outstanding performance of Japanese soccer and baseball players in international games. If we look at the global situation, however, there were also many tragic and heartbreaking events, including the continued loss of innocent lives in conflicts. I sincerely hope that the new year will be a bright and peaceful one.

In the field of civil court proceedings, the amended Code of Civil Procedure will finally come into full effect on May 21. The so-called Phase 3 will then start, which includes the online filing of petitions and other documents and the digitization of case records. I trust that all courts have steadily made preparations, including conducting operational reviews and holding discussions with bar associations and other relevant organizations. This is a significant legal reform that will profoundly transform court practices and operations, both within and beyond the courts. With less than six months left before the start of Phase 3, we should continue to make concerted efforts to be fully prepared. In addition, in non-contentious cases, such as civil enforcement and bankruptcy, it is necessary to make steady preparations for various measures, such as civil

enforcement based on electronically prepared titles of obligation, that will be implemented at the start of Phase 3 of civil procedure. It is also important, toward the full implementation of the amended Act by June 2028, to standardize court business from this stage with an eye on digitalization.

In the field of criminal court proceedings, the Act Partially Amending the Code of Criminal Procedure and Other Acts was enacted last year to promote digitalization, and the provisions for the digitalization of criminal procedure and warrants are expected to be implemented by March 2027. We have limited time available to prepare for the implementation, and we should, therefore, accelerate our efforts with a sense of urgency. With changes in the social situation, criminal court proceedings as a whole, including the *saiban-in* (lay judge) system, are becoming increasingly complex and challenging. In order to conduct trials in a fair and expeditious manner, it is also necessary to regularly review overall criminal procedures.

In the field of domestic relations cases, the Act Partially Amending the Civil Code and Other Acts relating to family law will come into force on April 1. It contains a broad range of revisions being made to matters that become an issue in a divorce, including the introduction of a system to enable both parents to have parental authority. Family courts will bear an important responsibility as a result. They are expected to meet the trust of the public by applying the results of the preparations they have made to the proper and streamlined management of proceedings based on the purport of the legislation. When the amended Civil Code comes into effect, there will also be significant changes in the manner in which conciliation proceedings are conducted, including the addition of new deliberation matters and procedures. It is necessary to further step up efforts to improve conciliation proceedings, and more specifically, to shorten appearance date

intervals. Also, with regard to juvenile cases, there is a need to examine the future of juvenile trial proceedings after digitalization. This needs to be done while taking into account the status of reviews of the digitalization of criminal proceedings and the special characteristics of juvenile trial and decision proceedings.

As I explained earlier, several laws governing the digitalization of various fields of court proceedings will become effective in stages over the next few years. We should therefore simultaneously undertake a major digitalization project, which includes large-scale system development and the updating of information and communications infrastructure. It will be a significant challenge for us to ensure that the project is successfully implemented. Although we, as an organization, may not excel in this specific technology, we are attempting to introduce it at courts across the country within a limited time period in this project. These courts handle a wide range of cases, concurrently perform numerous tasks and responsibilities, and vary in size and organizational structure. As such, it may not be possible, despite our best efforts, to eliminate unexpected incidents altogether. While I regret the burden this may place on our court officials who will use this technology, they are required to understand such circumstances and to make the necessary preparations and arrangements so that they can respond flexibly to various situations. For this reason, we should share information among ourselves as soon and as widely as possible, and we should build an environment that enables all court officials to work together to undertake the project. It may be a difficult challenge, but through a series of initiatives, it is our responsibility to rationalize and streamline court proceedings by leveraging digital resources and data, and to reduce the burden on members of the public who use court procedures while further enhancing the quality of court proceedings.

While the everyday lives of court officials, including judges, and their awareness are changing, in order for the courts to continue to play their role effectively, it is essential to create an open and positive work environment for court officials, in which flexible work arrangements are encouraged and each and every one of them can work with enthusiasm and a sense of purpose. I encourage all of our court officials, whether you are engaged in court case operations or judicial administrative affairs, to continue to rationalize, streamline, and standardize court business in the spirit of trial and error while listening to the creative ideas and simple questions from younger staff members. I hope that by doing so, you can focus on your essential roles and duties, leverage your expertise, and thrive in your workplace. I also hope that all of you, regardless of which department you belong to or whether you are from a judicial division or an administrative office, closely communicate and share views and ideas with each other, and that the organization will always foster and maintain frank and meaningful communication.

I would like to conclude my New Year's address, hoping that this year will be a wonderful year for you, and expecting that initiatives toward new court proceedings will make steady progress.