

Canadian, Japanese PMs agree to pursue free trade deal

By Christopher Guly

OTTAWA, Jan. 29 (Xinhua) -- The prime ministers of Canada and Japan have pledged to collaborate on a free trade agreement between both countries.

The leaders made the commitment by phone Monday night when Canada's Stephen Harper called Shinzo Abe, to congratulate him on his Liberal Democratic Party's landslide electoral victory on Dec. 26 and his appointment as Japan's 96th Prime Minister.

Just hours before the conversation, Canadian Agriculture Minister Gerry Ritz and International Trade Minister Ed Fast announced that Japan had agreed to open its market to Canadian beef from animals under 30 months of age effective this Friday.

Previously, Japan banned Canadian beef imports from animals older than 21 months in response to the outbreak of bovine spongiform encephalopathy or mad cow disease.

Japan is Canada's third largest export market for beef, and Canadian beef exports from animals under 21 months of age were valued at about 75 million Canadian dollars (about 75 million U.S. dollars) over the past three years, according to the Canadian government. Increased access to the Japanese market is expected to double the value of Canadian beef exports, said the Canadian Cattleman's Association.

"We have been working closely with Japan to expand access for our exporters," said Fast in a news release and who noted that the agreement with Japan "is proof that these efforts are getting results."

"We look forward to taking our trading relationship with Japan to the next level through an Economic Partnership Agreement which would provide additional export opportunities for Canadian businesses."

Meanwhile, Harper and Abe discussed the potential for bilateral cooperation on energy and international security, according to Harper's office.

The Canadian Prime Minister also offered condolences to his Japanese counterpart and the families of Japanese nationals killed in the terrorist attack at a gas plant in Algeria earlier this month.

Last week, Canada dispatched a team of investigators to look into claims that two Canadians were involved in the al Qaeda- linked assault that claimed the lives of at least 38 people taken hostage by the guerrillas.