



Morning Alert - Thursday, December 22, 2016

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HEADLINES

Morning news

NHK led with a report on the return of more than half of the Northern Training Area in Okinawa today. NTV led with a report on the outbreak of Norovirus. TBS, Fuji TV, and TV Asahi gave top play to reports that the total cost of the 2020 Tokyo Olympics and Paralympics is expected to reach a maximum of 1.8 trillion yen, saying that the Tokyo government, the organizing committee, and the GOJ are at odds over how the burden should be shared among them.

All national papers gave prominent front-page play to the GOJ's official decision to decommission the Monju prototype fast-breeder reactor in Fukui Prefecture, underscoring that even though over 1 trillion yen had been spent on the initiative, the reactor was in operation only for 250 days in total in the past 22 years due to malfunctions and mishaps.

SECURITY

Major portion of Okinawa training area returned to Japan

All papers reported that some 4,000 hectares of the Northern Training Area (NTA) reverted to Japan today following an official agreement sealed by the Joint Committee yesterday. Ambassador Kennedy joined Prime Minister Abe on Wednesday evening to make a formal announcement. As a result of the latest reversion, the acreage of land occupied by the U.S. military in the southernmost prefecture will be reduced by around 20%. However, the island prefecture still hosts almost 70% of all the U.S. military facilities in Japan in terms of area, down only about 4%. The vacated property will be returned to the land owners late next year at the earliest following the removal of dud shells and toxic waste.

Abe administration keen to play up partial return of NTA

Most papers wrote that the central government was eager to call attention to its achievement of significantly lessening Okinawa's base-hosting burden, quoting PM Abe as saying: "The NTA reversion will not only reduce the base burden but also greatly contribute to local economic development through the effective use of vacated properties." The GOJ was strongly committed to realizing the return this year and hence took a hard line by mobilizing riot policemen from other prefectures to remove opponents of construction of helipads in the belief that local residents would welcome the return. However, the recent Osprey mishap in Nago threw cold water on the administration's festive mood. Tokyo is prepared to assist local communities in promoting tourism in the returned land by designating it a national park and obtaining UNESCO's endorsement as a world heritage site.

Okinawa not happy

The papers noted the conspicuous absence of festivity in Okinawa despite the return of the huge U.S. training field in part because the reverted property is a densely wooded area far from residential districts. The fact that new helipads were built in the remaining training area has prompted some local citizens to complain of a "greater burden" given that they will be used by the Futenma-based Ospreys, one of which recently "crashed" in shallow waters nearby. The U.S. military's decision to resume flight training of the tilt-rotor planes less than a week after the accident, coupled with the central government's consent for the resumption, dashed any residual optimism. In announcing his decision to boycott the reversion ceremony to be held in Nago today, Governor Onaga said on Tuesday: "It is an event that will not be attended by representatives from anywhere in Okinawa. I would like the U.S. government and people on the mainland to realize the abnormal manner of the NTA's return."

On Onaga's absence from the planned ceremony, Chief Cabinet Secretary Suga expressed displeasure by telling the press yesterday: "He told me he welcomed the reversion when I personally explained the matter to him. But he retracted the remark a few days later. This is not a trivial matter."

Global Hawks to be deployed at Misawa

Most papers reported on a MOD announcement on Wednesday that three Japanese Global Hawks will be deployed at ASDF base in Misawa, Aomori Prefecture, beginning in FY2019, noting that the reconnaissance planes will be jointly operated by the three branches of the SDF to collect intelligence primarily on China and North Korea.

Yamaguchi leader accepts proposed deployment of F35s at Iwakuni

Mainichi and Sankei wrote that during his meeting with Defense Minister Inada on Wednesday, Yamaguchi Governor Muraoka said the prefectural government has decided to accept the planned

deployment of the F35 Lightning II at MACS Iwakuni on the grounds that the safety of the state-of-the-art stealth fighters has been confirmed.

“Class A” accident involving patrol plane occurred at Kadena AB

All dailies reported yesterday evening or this morning on the disclosure by the Naval Safety Center that a Navy P-8 Poseidon patrol and reconnaissance airplane sustained damage to its fuselage and nose gear after colliding with a piece of traction equipment at Kadena AB on December 18. The center categorized the incident as a “Class A” accident. There were no reports of injuries. Tokyo Shimbun stressed that this was the latest in a succession of serious accidents involving USFJ aircraft in the past several months.

INTERNATIONAL

Japan to oppose proposed sanctions against South Sudan

Mainichi claimed that despite intense pressure from Washington, the Japanese government is likely to oppose the adoption of the U.S.-drafted sanctions resolution on South Sudan in the belief that the proposed arms embargo would prompt the local government to retaliate against U.N. peacekeepers from Japan and elsewhere. CCS Suga told the press yesterday: “We will decide [on how to respond to the proposed motion] by taking into account what is needed for peace and stability in South Sudan. It is important to support the local government’s efforts. Yomiuri and Nikkei carried similar stories, with the former quoting an unnamed senior MOFA official as saying: “We don’t mind Japan being blamed for killing the resolution.” An unnamed high-ranking Japanese diplomat told the Nikkei yesterday: “We cannot accept the U.S. proposal,” while another MOFA official said it is “extremely unusual” for Tokyo to oppose a UN resolution pushed hard by Washington.

Japan’s First Lady raises doubts about next U.S. leader

Asahi took up yesterday’s speech at Kyoto University by PM Abe’s wife Akie Abe, who commented on the election of Donald Trump in the U.S. presidential race by saying: “I wonder if it was a good thing that Mr. Trump won in a ‘fun’ election.” The Japanese First Lady made this remark in response to a question from a local high student, who asked if she has any suggestions to make Japan’s elections livelier like the U.S. presidential race. She clarified the controversial statement later by telling the press: “I didn’t know the press was there, and it was a careless remark.... I would like to establish a rapport with Mr. Trump. As the U.S. wields enormous power in the world, I don’t think he will do anything unusual. Japan may need to exercise its own influence so as to prevent [the Trump administration] from running amok.”

Komatsu CEO grateful to Trump for raising company profile

Tokyo Shimbun published an interview with President Ohashi of Komatsu Ltd., during which he expressed gratitude for President-elect Trump because his firm’s profile was boosted in the U.S. market following the businessman-turned-politician’s criticism. Trump said on the campaign trail:

“People are buying Komatsu tractors instead of Caterpillar tractors. I’m telling you, we’re in trouble.” The Japanese businessmen explained that many Americans have learned of Komatsu, as U.S. media has reported extensively and mostly positively on the company’s extensive business activities in North America, including the employment of some 6,000 Americans.

ROK military conducts landing drill on Liancourt Rocks

Sankei wrote from Seoul that the South Korean Navy carried out naval training in the Sea of Japan on Wednesday, in which some ten personnel aboard helicopters practiced landing on the Liancourt Rocks. This was the first drill of its kind in five years and the first one under the Park administration. While noting that the landing session was originally planned in late November, it had been postponed until yesterday perhaps out of deference to Tokyo, with which the Park administration signed a GSOMIA on Nov. 23. Japan’s MOFA reportedly protested the training “on Japanese territory.”

