


JAPAN MEDIA HIGHLIGHTS

Morning Alert - Friday, July 24, 2017

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Morning news

NHK, NTV, and Fuji TV gave top play to reports on the record rainfall in Akita Prefecture over the weekend, reporting that many homes were flooded after the Omono River overflowed its banks. TV Asahi led with a report on the Sendai mayoral election on Sunday, in which a candidate backed by the ruling parties was defeated by a candidate backed by the opposition parties. TBS continued to report on the Kake Gakuen scandal, saying that Prime Minister Abe will attend a Lower House budgetary committee session today to explain the matter.

Main front-page stories in national dailies included the results of the Sendai mayoral race, the results of nationwide opinion polls pointing to a continued slide in public confidence in Prime Minister Abe, and the resignation of the top official of an ROK foundation on “comfort women.”

POLITICS

Abe’s support rate plummets for second month in a row

Monday’s Mainichi led with the results of its latest public opinion survey that put support for the Abe administration at 26%, down 10 points from a month ago, and nonsupport at 56%, up 12 points, noting that this was the first time for Abe’s popularity rate to drop below 30% since he became prime minister four and a half years ago. Some 62% were against the idea of his reelection as LDP president next fall. Three out of four respondents expressed doubts about the explanations given at the Diet on the premier’s involvement in the Kake Gakuen scandal by his cabinet members. The daily said Abe’s increasing unpopularity is bound to have adverse effects on his signature policies such as constitutional amendment, explaining that 66% of respondents said he “should not rush” to revise the nation’s supreme law.

In an analytical piece, Mainichi said the Kantei was devastated by the double-digit plunge in two consecutive months given that many of Abe’s predecessors were forced to step down eventually after their approval rates plunged below 30%. Although the prime minister is hoping to turn the situation around by reshuffling his cabinet on Aug. 3, the daily expressed pessimism by citing the public’s negative view on Abe’s plan to retain core cabinet members. About 52% expressed opposition to Abe’s purported plan to ask Deputy Prime Minister Aso and Chief Cabinet Secretary Suga to stay on. The article, added, however that Japanese voters do not

appear to have any viable alternative in mind to the embattled prime minister, pointing out that public support for the largest opposition Democratic Party was only 5%, down three points from a month ago.

The latest Nikkei opinion poll pointed to a similar trend, with the support rate for the premier dropping 10 points to 39% and the nonsupport rate rising 10 points to 52%. Approximately 65% said the administration is "arrogant." The daily said Abe's unpopularity surged among female and swing voters, noting that although his approval rate has dropped significantly several times in the past over policy matters, such as the enactment of the controversial comprehensive security laws, the latest plunge was apparently caused by the public's lack of confidence in the prime minister's character. Some 44% said they cannot trust Abe. The poll also found that more than 70% called for the replacement of Defense Minister Inada.

Opposition candidate prevails in Sendai mayoral election

All papers gave prominent front-page coverage to yesterday's election of Kazuko Koori as the mayor of Sendai, noting that the candidate backed by the Democratic Party and the Japanese Communist Party defeated her rival supported by the LDP and the Komeito party. The papers claimed that growing public criticism of the Abe administration over the Kake Gakuen scandal obviously had an effect on the performance of the ruling coalition's candidate. An LDP Diet member from Sendai said: "Public criticism of the prime minister is spreading rapidly. Nobody was interested in listening to my stump speeches on economic policy because they don't like Abe." The dailies said the latest election setback is bound to have serious implications for the political management of the Abe administration, which was hit hard by the dismal performance of the ruling LDP in the Tokyo Metropolitan Assembly election earlier this month. LDP politicians are alarmed by the surge in public disapproval of the prime minister, with an unnamed senior LDP official telling Asahi: "The LDP cannot win in the next general election without replacing PM Abe."

Meanwhile, Sankei predicted that the results of the Sendai race are likely to embolden some Democratic Party members to deepen cooperation with the Japanese Communist Party for the next general election. The paper also said the outcome may help embattled DP President Renho regain her grip on power, which has weakened significantly following the party's major defeat in the Tokyo assembly race in early July.

Abe vows to amend Constitution

Asahi and Tokyo Shimbun took up a meeting held yesterday between Prime Minister Abe and Chairman Aoki of Junior Chamber International Japan, at which the premier said the LDP will try to make a decision this summer on which articles of the Constitution should be revised. With this remark, Abe made clear his intention to continue pursuing his original idea for the ruling party to submit a draft constitution for parliamentary discussions in the fall despite his plummeting public approval. However, Abe reportedly stopped short of stating his preference on which articles to amend.

Kishida says GOJ, ruling parties should unite to support PM Abe

Sunday's Nikkei reported that attention is focused on whether Foreign Minister Kishida will remain in the cabinet when the cabinet and LDP leadership are reshuffled on Aug. 3. The paper said following the LDP's crushing defeat in the Tokyo assembly election and plunge in cabinet support, Prime Minister Abe is planning to keep Kishida in an important post in order to demonstrate party solidarity, either as the foreign minister or a leading member of the LDP. The paper said Kishida, who heads the LDP's Kochikai faction, visited the grave of former Prime Minister Ohira in Kagawa on Saturday morning, after which he told reporters: "We must make efforts to unite and support the government." The paper said Kishida expressed his strong will to support the Abe government instead of his desire to become Abe's successor.

INTERNATIONAL

Operation of comfort women foundation to be discontinued

Yomiuri led with a finding from Seoul that the leader of a foundation set up by the South Korean government to support the "comfort women" with Japanese funding announced her resignation last week at a board meeting. In announcing her intention to step down, Reconciliation and Healing Foundation Executive Director Tae-hyeon stated: "I did what I had to do." The paper claimed that as a result of her resignation, the operation of the organization will probably be discontinued only a year after its launch given that the Moon administration is scrutinizing it in a critical manner. Yomiuri added that the 2015 comfort women accord with Japan may be overturned pending the ongoing review by the ROK government. Other papers ran similar stories, voicing apprehension about the possible derailment of the important bilateral diplomatic accord between Tokyo and Seoul.

Poll finds drop in Japanese, South Koreans who approve of comfort women accord

Saturday morning's Mainichi reported that the Genron NPO and the South Korean think-tank East Asia Institute announced on Friday the results of their joint opinion poll conducted from June to July, which found that 41.8% of Japanese, down 6.1 points from the same period last year, and 21.8% of South Koreans, down 6.8 points, expressed approval of the comfort women agreement. The disapproval rate was 25.4%, up 4.5 points, among Japanese and 55.5%, up 17.9 points, among South Koreans. When asked about the reason for their disapproval, 77.7% of South Koreans said it was because "the agreement was reached without reflecting the views of the comfort women." The daily said the results probably stem from the inauguration of South Korean President Moon, who promised to renegotiate the accord. Nikkei carried a similar report.

Sankei claims DOS official said "Japanese military trafficked" comfort women

In relation to the Moon administration's recent announcement that it plans to establish a memorial day in honor of the comfort women, Saturday morning's Sankei front-paged a report saying that when asked about the U.S. perception of the "sexual slave system," DOS spokesperson Nauert said on Thursday that "that is something that we, by and large, condemn.... It's an area of major concern of ours." The paper said South Korean media took up her remarks and reported that the USG denounced "Japan's sexual slavery." The daily added that Nauert also said it is "a very sensitive issue." Sankei wrote that it contacted the State Department since Nauert's remarks could be interpreted as an acknowledgement by the USG that the comfort women were sexual slaves. EAP Bureau spokesperson Adams reportedly told the paper on Thursday that in general terms "it is a terrible human rights violation that women were trafficked for sexual purposes by the Japanese military during WWII" and that "the U.S. government's position on the matter remains unchanged."

The daily wrote in a separate article that Adams' remarks that the comfort women "were trafficked by the Japanese military" are clearly inaccurate and mean that the U.S. has taken a step backward in its understanding of the comfort women issue. The paper said although the Obama administration welcomed the comfort women agreement in which both the Japanese and ROK governments confirmed that the comfort women issue had been "finally and irreversibly resolved," the process through which the governments forged the agreement and the weight of the accord are apparently not being upheld by the Trump administration.

North Korean submarine stayed in Sea of Japan for at least 48 hours

Saturday morning's Sankei carried a report from Washington saying that CNN claimed on Thursday that several U.S. defense officials said a North Korean submarine had been in the Sea of Japan for about 48 hours as of the time of the report. The daily said that while CNN reported that it was a Romeo-class submarine, Johns Hopkins University's website 38 North announced that it could be a Sinpo-class submarine produced in North Korea and designed to carry SLBMs. Sankei wrote that it is extremely unusual for a North Korean submarine to conduct operations

away from home for such a long period of time, adding that 38 North claimed that North Korea may be preparing to test-launch a "KN11" SLBM or a more advanced model.

Sankei reported in a separate article that Chief Cabinet Secretary Suga said in a press briefing on Friday that the GOJ "is continuously collecting and analyzing information on North Korea's military moves, including its nuclear and missile development, with intense interest."

Suga defends Prime Minister Abe's wife after Trump comments on her English ability

Saturday morning's Nikkei reported that regarding President Trump's remark that Prime Minister Abe's wife Akie cannot speak English, Chief Cabinet Secretary Suga told reporters on Friday: "President Trump said he enjoyed having dinner with Mrs. Abe. They had a meaningful conversation." The paper wrote that since the U.S. and Japan are enjoying positive ties, Suga apparently tried to paper over the President's remarks.

Abe, Kishida meet with British Foreign Minister Johnson

Nikkei reported on Saturday that Prime Minister Abe met with visiting British Foreign Minister Johnson at the Kantei on Saturday. Abe reportedly said: "I hope that Japan and the UK will promote cooperation from a global perspective for the peace and prosperity of the world." Nikkei also reported online that Johnson expressed gratitude for the broad agreement reached on a Japan-EU EPA. Johnson also reportedly said he looks forward to further developing the Japan-EU EPA. The daily said the British foreign minister also met with Foreign Minister Kishida, adding that the two officials confirmed stronger cooperation and promised to work together against the threat of North Korea.

SECURITY

U.S. media reports that Fitzgerald responsible for collision

Sunday morning's Asahi, Nikkei, and Sankei reported from Washington on a CNN report on Friday saying that according to the results of the preliminary investigation into the collision between the USS Fitzgerald and a Philippine container ship off the coast of Japan in June that killed seven crew members, the accident was caused by "multiple errors" by the Fitzgerald's crew and a failure to take prompt action. The dailies wrote that the initial findings show that the Fitzgerald crew failed to detect the approach of the vessel and to take action to avoid the collision.

Large number of complaints filed over noise at MCAS Iwakuni on July 10

Today's Tokyo Shimbun published a prominent inside-page report saying that a large number of complaints were filed with the Iwakuni municipal government concerning noise caused by training conducted by U.S. military planes at MCAS Iwakuni on July 10. The paper noted that the number of complaints by local residents was the largest since 1998. According to the municipal government, F-35B stealth fighters were involved in the training in question. A senior base official reportedly expressed regret to city officials over the "inconvenience" imposed on residents by the training, which he said was "essential" for operational reasons. The U.S. military official reportedly promised to pay "maximum attention" to ensuring aviation safety and reducing noise when conducting pilot training in the future. However, the article expressed concern about a possible surge in noise pollution around the installation in view of the planned transfer of a carrier-borne wing from NAF Atsugi.

Onaga to file suit against GOJ today

Yomiuri wrote that the Okinawa prefectural government is expected to file a suit against the central government today, explaining that Governor Onaga will ask the Naha District Court to issue an injunction to stop the ongoing landfill work off Camp Schwab. The plaintiff is set to argue that the FRF initiative is illegal because the Abe administration failed to obtain the necessary permission from the prefectural government.

ECONOMY

U.S., Japan to hold working-level talks to prepare for economic dialogue

Sunday morning's Nikkei reported that the governments of the U.S. and Japan will hold working-level talks in Washington this week in preparation for the second U.S.-Japan Economic Dialogue slated for this fall. The paper said trade will be the main topic of the working-level talks, adding that the GOJ is hoping to gauge the stance of the U.S. since it appears to be stepping up its hardline trade policies as seen in the review of NAFTA. The daily said the Japanese side is planning to explain its position and increase bilateral cooperation with the U.S. in view of China's overproduction. According to the paper, Vice Minister of Finance for International Affairs Asakawa will visit Washington on July 23 to meet with Everett Eissenstat, who will serve as President Trump's "sherpa." The paper said Finance Minister Aso is also expected to visit the U.S. as early as September to hold a preparatory meeting for the economic dialogue. Noting that President Trump mentioned reducing the trade deficit with Japan and abolishing non-tariff barriers on auto trade during the U.S.-Japan summit held earlier this month, the paper speculated that President Trump may call for concluding a bilateral FTA.

