



Morning Alert - Monday, October 16, 2017

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HEADLINES

Morning news

NHK and NTV gave top play to reports on the ongoing election campaign for the Lower House election. TV Asahi led with a report on a data falsification scandal involving Kobe Steel. TBS gave top play to a report on the North Korean situation. Fuji TV reported that the temperature in Tokyo is likely to drop to 12 degrees Celsius today.

Most national papers led with reports on the campaign speeches delivered across the nation on Sunday by Prime Minister Abe and the leaders of other major political parties. Sankei's top story was an article on the 20th anniversary of the effectuation of the Act on Organ Transplantation today, stressing that the number of organ transplants in Japan is still the lowest among industrialized countries.

POLITICS

Ruling coalition likely to win almost 300 seats in Lower House election

Saturday morning's Asahi front-paged its initial prediction for the Oct. 22 general election based on the results of a nationwide public opinion poll and field surveys, claiming that the ruling coalition of the LDP and the Komeito party is likely to capture almost 300 of the 465 seats up for grabs. Most ruling party candidates are apparently waging strong campaigns both in single-seat constituencies and proportional representation. The Party of Hope led by Tokyo Governor Koike and its partner the Japan Innovation Party are having a tough time even in their respective home territories of Tokyo and Osaka, with many of their candidates being outperformed by LDP rivals. On the other hand, the Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan (CDPJ) is expected to win as many as 40 seats, up more than 25 from the current 15 who used to belong to the Democratic Party.

The daily attributed the LDP's strong performance to the "balkanization" of opposition parties, explaining that while the public appears to be equally divided in their views on the Abe administration's accomplishments over the past five years, voters who voiced disapproval of the premier were split into four groups when asked which party they will vote for in proportional representation. Almost 30% chose the CDPJ, followed by the Party of Hope (25%), the LDP (19%), and the Japanese Communist Party (14%). The paper also said that in 70% of the 162 single-seat districts where the LDP, the Party of Hope, and the CDPJ each fielded their own candidates, the LDP candidates are waging solid campaigns.

Today's Mainichi also gave top play to its election projection, noting that while the ruling coalition is bound to win more than 300 seats, the Party of Hope appears to be losing ground. As the CDPJ's campaign appears to be picking up additional momentum, the daily forecast that the liberal party may capture the largest number of seats in proportional representation within the opposition bloc. The Japanese Communist Party may lose several of its seats given that more voters critical of the Abe administration are apparently inclined to support the CDPJ. The daily added that according to its latest opinion poll, voters who want Prime Minister Abe to resign outnumbered those who want him to stay on, at 47% to 37%.

Meanwhile, according to the latest opinion poll taken by Jiji Press, some 31% of the Japanese public said they would vote for the LDP in proportional representation, followed by the Party of Hope with almost 12%. Support for the Abe cabinet stood at 37.1%, down 4.7 points from last month, whereas nonsupport was 41.8%, up 5.1 points.

SECURITY

U.S. military dismisses Japan's call for indefinite suspension of CH-53 operations

Saturday morning papers highlighted Defense Minister Onodera's press remarks on Friday in which he said that flight operations by Okinawa-based CH-53 helicopters should be suspended indefinitely until the cause of the recent incident is determined and safety is confirmed. According to Mainichi, a USFJ spokesperson said although the U.S. military has acknowledged Minister Onodera's request, it has not agreed to suspend the operations indefinitely. Noting that Okinawa Area Coordinator Nicholson has already ordered a 96-hour suspension, the daily said GOJ and LDP officials are worried that if CH-53 flights are resumed after the four-day suspension, the issue will have adverse effects on the election prospects for LDP candidates in the island prefecture.

Today's Mainichi and Tokyo Shimbun wrote that some 200 people gathered near the impact site yesterday to protest the incident and call for the closure of the helipads in the Northern Training Area. The papers added that local officials and residents will react strongly if the 96-hour flight suspension is lifted this morning as scheduled.

Helicopter that made emergency landing made unscheduled landing in June

Most Saturday morning papers reported on the finding that the CH-53 helicopter that made an emergency landing near the Northern Training Area on Thursday after catching fire in midair made an unscheduled landing at an airport on Kume Island on June 1 after a warning light came on in the cockpit indicating a malfunction. The aircraft left Kume Island two hours later to return to MCAS Futenma. The U.S. military called the mishap a precautionary landing and did not disclose the nature of the problem. While noting that it is unclear whether the latest incident was related to the previous mishap, several papers said the finding raises doubts about the effectiveness of the preventive measures put in place by the U.S. military.

Meanwhile, several Sunday papers took up Okinawa Marine Corps' announcement on Saturday that while the helicopter that crashed contained radioactive material, it was safely removed during recovery operations. Although the Marines did not disclose the details of the radioactive material, it is suspected to be strontium 90, which is apparently used in the indicators for the rotor blades. The Okinawa Defense Bureau checked the accident site for two days for possible radioactive contamination but did not detect any abnormalities.

Additional Aegis warship to be deployed in East Asia

Sunday's Tokyo Shimbun wrote that a guided-missile destroyer, the USS O'Kane, will be temporarily deployed from its homeport in Hawaii to East Asia and the Indian Ocean, speculating that the deployment is probably meant to assist the 7th Fleet in patrolling the region in preparation for possible missile provocations by North Korea. Two of the 7th Fleet's Aegis warships are currently out of service due to fatal mishaps earlier this year.

U.S. military plane may have released flares over Hiroshima

Monday's Sankei and Tokyo Shimbun wrote that local residents in Hiroshima witnessed what appeared to be a U.S. military jet releasing "fireballs" several times over Kitahiroshima, Hiroshima Prefecture, on the afternoon of Oct. 11. The papers speculated that the aircraft may have launched flares, aerial infrared countermeasures against heat-seeking missiles, for training purposes.

ASDF scrambles in response to Russian aircraft up by half

Several Saturday morning papers reported on an SDF announcement on Friday that the number of ASDF scrambles in response to Russian military aircraft increased by almost 50% during the six-month period ending on Sept. 30 to 267. The Defense Ministry speculated that the Russians are anxious to collect intelligence on enhanced coordination between the U.S. military and the SDF over North Korea. In contrast, Japan's scrambles in response to PLA aircraft plunged by 30% to 287 in the same period.

INTERNATIONAL

President Trump to deliver foreign policy speech in Seoul

Sunday's Yomiuri front-paged a report saying that President Trump is planning to make a foreign policy speech in South Korea when he visits there in early November, predicting that he will highlight his administration's policy of imposing maximum pressure on North Korea. In the address, the U.S. leader is likely to strongly denounce Pyongyang's relentless provocations, urge the Kim regime to abandon its nuclear and missile development, and reiterate the U.S. defense commitment to Japan and South Korea through extended deterrence. The daily added that the President will deliver a separate Asia policy speech in Vietnam when he attends the annual APEC leaders' meeting, speculating that he will probably address China's militarization of the South China Sea and underscore Washington's resolve to defend freedom of navigation in the area.

In a related item, Monday's Asahi wrote that the USG probably will not allow President Trump to visit the DMZ when he goes to South Korea so as to ensure his safety. Some USG officials are concerned that North Korea may be tempted to capitalize on such a visit to take revenge against the President, who has used harsh rhetoric to criticize Kim Jong Un. While the ROK government has reportedly proposed that the President visit Camp Humphreys south of Seoul instead, the article wrote that the U.S. leader may insist on a trip to the DMZ.

U.S., South Korea to conduct joint military training

Saturday morning's Asahi and Sankei focused on an announcement made by the South Korean Navy on Friday that it will conduct joint exercises with the U.S. Navy in the Sea of Japan and the Yellow Sea for five days beginning on Oct. 16. The USS Ronald Reagan and numerous warships and aircraft are expected to participate in the training to prepare for further provocations by North Korea.

In a related development, Sunday's Asahi took up the disclosure by a military source based in Seoul that spy satellites detected about five mobile platforms loaded with ballistic missiles moving toward multiple undetermined locations near Pyongyang last week. The U.S. and South Korea suspect that the simultaneous movements may have been intended to conceal the actual site for a launch to coincide with the planned start of the U.S.-ROK drill.

Government spokesman comments on U.S. departure from UNESCO

Saturday morning's Yomiuri reported on press remarks on Friday by Deputy Chief Cabinet Secretary Nogami, who commented on the Trump administration's decision to withdraw from UNESCO by saying: "As it was a decision made by the USG, it will not affect Japan's policy toward UNESCO."

China arrests two detained Japanese nationals

Saturday morning's Sankei wrote that two Japanese citizens who have been detained in China since March were apparently formally arrested in September, speculating that they may be under investigation for espionage while carrying out a geological survey there.

U.S., Japan to agree on enhanced energy cooperation in economic dialogue

Saturday morning's Mainichi published a preview of the U.S.-Japan economic dialogue to be held in Washington on Monday, projecting that the two sides are likely to agree to enhance bilateral coordination in such areas as U.S. energy exports to Japan and Japan's infrastructure investment in the United States. However, the two sides may not be able to find middle ground on such trade issues as autos, beef, and intellectual property.

Sunday's Tokyo Shimbun ran a similar story, adding that it is uncertain whether the U.S. side will propose launching bilateral FTA negotiations during Monday's session. The paper quoted an unnamed senior USG official as saying: "The White House is preoccupied with the NAFTA renegotiations. While President Trump may mention a 'bilateral' agreement, FTA talks probably won't start any time soon."

In a related development, Monday's Asahi and Mainichi took up press remarks made by Treasury Secretary Mnuchin on Saturday about the upcoming economic dialogue. "Japan is one of our most important allies and an important trading partner," he said. "I'm looking forward to a very frank and open discussion." However, the Treasury chief declined to state whether the U.S. side will propose launching bilateral FTA talks.

Ex-USTR says FTA with Japan would be difficult

Saturday morning's Asahi and Nikkei carried their respective interviews with former USTR Froman, who projected that a U.S.-Japan FTA will probably not be realized in the near future, as the Trump administration will prioritize trade negotiations with NAFTA partners, China, and South Korea. The Obama administration's top trade negotiator criticized the Trump administration's decision to withdraw from the TPP by saying that it was "one of the biggest strategic mistakes in U.S. history." He underscored that as a result of the departure, the U.S. has lost its trade leadership in the Asia-Pacific region. Froman urged the remaining 11 TPP member states to preserve the agreed-upon terms and conditions of the free trade pact.