



Morning Alert - Tuesday, February 27, 2018

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HEADLINES

Morning news

All networks led with reports on the return of the Japanese Olympians from PyeongChang on Monday.

Major front-page items in national papers included updates on the theft of cryptocurrency from the Coincheck currency exchange, the discovery of additional errors in data from surveys conducted by the Health and Labor Ministry regarding the working hours of Japanese employees, a Defense Ministry proposal to deploy an SDF surface-to-ship missile unit to the main island of Okinawa, and a plan by global telecommunication companies to accelerate the launch of 5G mobile networks.

INTERNATIONAL

North Korean official reiterates readiness to hold talks with U.S.

All papers wrote from Seoul that Kim Yong Chol, who headed the North Korean delegation to the PyeongChang Olympics closing ceremony, told senior ROK government officials again on Monday that Pyongyang is open to dialogue with Washington. The dailies also took up a White House statement released on Sunday regarding the DPRK official's similar remarks made earlier to South Korean President Moon, with Mainichi conjecturing that although the Trump administration appears to be firm in maintaining the pressure on North Korea, it is also taking a flexible stance on holding communications with the defiant regime. The daily explained that it appears as though neither Washington nor Tokyo is ruling out "preliminary contact" with Pyongyang to see whether it is finally ready to take steps toward denuclearization. Sankei wrote that the GOJ is anxious to take a concerted line with the Trump administration in responding to North Korea's overtures.

In a related story, Sankei wrote that the Trump administration is apparently being very careful in selecting language to describe communications with the Kim regime. The daily quoted an unnamed high-ranking MOFA official as saying: “The USG is strictly differentiating between chats, talks, dialogue, and negotiations.” The daily asserted that Tokyo is not opposed to the idea of Washington making “contact” through chats or talks with Pyongyang, since either form of communication allows each side to make its own case without negotiating. According to the daily, the USG and GOJ share the view that dialogue or negotiations must be preceded by North Korea’s stated intention to denuclearize.

USG to dispatch Coast Guard vessels in Western Pacific

Asahi claimed that according to several GOJ sources, the Trump administration has conveyed to the GOJ a plan to deploy U.S. Coast Guard patrol boats in the Western Pacific to monitor and crack down on illicit ship-to-ship trade involving DPRK tankers and cargo ships. The Abe administration has reportedly welcomed the proposal in the belief that it will put “psychological pressure” on North Korea. The article added that Tokyo and Washington are determined to apply maximum pressure on the DPRK regardless of inter-Korean reconciliation.

In a related development, all national dailies wrote that Prime Minister Abe spoke by phone with his British counterpart May yesterday and asked for London’s cooperation in reining in North Korea’s attempts to evade UN sanctions at sea. The British leader reportedly agreed with Abe on the need to step up the pressure on Pyongyang.

Senior Pentagon official comments on joint exercises with ROK

All national papers highlighted a meeting held yesterday in Tokyo between Defense Minister Onodera and visiting Assistant Secretary of Defense Schriver, in which the senior USG official reportedly said that the U.S.-South Korea joint drills will be resumed after the PyeongChang Paralympics. In reply to the Japanese minister’s remarks emphasizing the importance of the two nations taking a concerted approach so as not to be taken in by North Korea’s “charm offensive,” A/S Schriver was quoted by Yomiuri as saying: “North Korea has done nothing to indicate that it intends to denuclearize. We should continue with the current approach.”

Foreign Minister Kono meets with U.S. politicians

Nikkei wrote that Foreign Minister Kono held talks with visiting U.S. lawmakers from the Senate and House Armed Services Committees on Monday, during which they agreed on bilateral cooperation for creating a “free and open Indo-Pacific” region. The top Japanese diplomat called for U.S. cooperation by saying: “The U.S.-Japan alliance is more important than ever in the face of the increasingly severe regional security environment. We would like to promote cooperation with the United States for the realization of the Indo-Pacific initiative.”

SECURITY

SDF missile unit likely to be deployed in Okinawa

Asahi led with the disclosure by several GOJ sources that the Defense Ministry is mulling the deployment of an SDF surface-to-ship missile unit on the main island of Okinawa with the goal of deterring China's aggressive naval operations in the Nansei Island chain and that the idea will probably be included in the National Defense Program Guidelines to be updated in December. Although there are plans for the installation of similar units on Miyako Island and Ishigaki Island in Okinawa, the ministry has reportedly concluded that a separate missile regiment needs to be set up on the main island given that the surface-to-ship missiles to be deployed on Miyako do not have the range to cover the strait between Miyako and the main island, which are about 290 kilometers apart. The ministry is reportedly alarmed by PLA Navy ships' frequent passage through the strait toward the Pacific Ocean, quoting an unnamed senior MOD official as saying that PLA operations in this vicinity are posing a major threat to the U.S. military in the Western Pacific.

The daily explained in a separate article that the GOJ is extremely keen to strengthen the defense of the Nansei Islands by using isles in Okinawa as major platforms to rein in what it believes are Beijing's moves to take control of the Western Pacific as well as the South China Sea. The article underscored the need for the GOJ to obtain Okinawa's understanding and support for its plan to enhance deterrence against China in coordination with the U.S. military, especially given that the tension is rising between Okinawa and Tokyo over Futenma relocation and the recent series of mishaps involving U.S. military aircraft.

Misawa AB commander apologizes for incident in which tanks were dropped in lake

Regarding the recent mishap in which a USAF F-16 jettisoned two fuel tanks into a lake near Misawa AB, Yomiuri wrote briefly that Col. Jobe, Commander of the 35th Fighter Wing, met with the local mayor and fishermen's association chairman separately and reportedly apologized for "causing great inconvenience."

SOCIETY

More body parts of missing woman discovered

All papers reported that what are believed to be additional parts of the dismembered body of a missing Hyogo woman were found by the police in three locations in mountainous areas of Osaka and Kyoto on Monday. A 26-year-old American man who was arrested last week for confining the woman is reportedly suspected of dismembering and abandoning her body parts given that traces of her blood have been detected in a tourist apartment that he rented. The suspect has already admitted to the police that he abandoned the body parts. He is expected to face additional charges of damaging and abandoning the body.

POLITICS

GOJ making plans for three casinos in Japan

Sankei front-paged a GOJ idea to select three locations across Japan for allowing the opening of integrated resorts (IR) featuring casinos, saying that although the GOJ is hoping to incorporate this element in the planned casino implementation legislation, some ruling coalition officials are calling for more locations. According to a recommendation put together last summer by a GOJ blue-ribbon commission, only one casino will be permitted in each IR, which must include an international conference facility, hotels, and two other facilities, in addition to a casino.

