



Morning Alert - Tuesday, March 13, 2018

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HEADLINES

Morning news

All TV networks and newspapers gave top play to reports on the Finance Ministry's acknowledgement that it falsified government documents on the sale of state-owned land to private school operator Moritomo Gakuen, saying that calls are growing among the opposition parties for Finance Minister Aso to step down.

POLITICS

Abe administration hit hard by Finance Ministry document falsification scandal

All national dailies gave extensive coverage to Finance Minister Aso's acknowledgment on Monday that a total of 14 official documents concerning the heavily discounted sale of state-owned property to Morimoto Gakuen were altered after the scandal broke early last year to make their contents consistent with remarks made at the Diet by then-Financial Bureau Director General Sagawa that were later proven to be completely false. More than 200 items in the 14 documents were either redacted or revised in accordance with instructions from senior Financial Bureau officials. The names of several politicians and of Prime Minister Abe's wife Akie were deleted. Both Aso and PM Abe apologized on Monday by saying that the scandal potentially undermines public trust in the executive branch of the government. All dailies and opposition parties were unanimous in condemning the ministry in the belief that the scandal shakes the very foundation of democracy since the legislative branch was apparently engaged in discussions on the Moritomo scandal for more than a year based on false information from what is dubbed as the nation's "most powerful ministry."

Although calls are mounting for Aso to step down in order to take responsibility, PM Abe reportedly has no intention to have him resign because he also serves as the deputy prime minister and has

been one of the two “key pillars” of the administration along with Chief Cabinet Secretary Suga. In offering an apology to the public on TV yesterday, the prime minister said: “We will continue the investigations to unravel the scandal. I want Mr. Aso to take responsibility for the investigation.” Aso also dismissed calls for his resignation.

The dailies conjectured that the administration is desperate to pin the blame on the ministry’s Financial Bureau so as to defend Aso. Chief Cabinet Secretary Suga was apparently trying to downplay the impact of the scandal by telling the press on Monday: “As the main parts of the documents in question remain largely unchanged, I think they were simply rewritten, not falsified.” However, the opposition camp is upping the ante by continuing to boycott Diet deliberations on all legislation until the administration and the ruling coalition agree to summon Sagawa as a sworn witness to testify in the parliament. The papers also wrote that as public approval of the Abe cabinet is likely to plunge due to the falsification scandal, LDP lawmakers who are displeased with the premier may be emboldened to undercut his bid to seek reelection in the LDP presidential race in September.

In a related story, Mainichi wrote that Aso is likely not to take part in the G20 financial ministerial meeting to be held in Argentina next week so as to concentrate on dealing with the scandal.

INTERNATIONAL

FM Kono, ROK envoy agree to continue pressure on DPRK

All papers reported on yesterday’s meeting in Tokyo between Foreign Minister Kono and South Korea’s National Intelligence Service Director Suh, during which they agreed to maintain the pressure on North Korea in coordination with the United States so as to press the Pyongyang to take concrete steps toward denuclearization ahead of the upcoming inter-Korean and U.S.-DPRK summits. Kono told the press afterward: “We aligned our approaches very carefully. We forged a consensus on not repeating the mistakes of the past and continuing to apply maximum pressure.” Kono and Suh also agreed to enhance bilateral coordination to resolve the abduction issue. Kono reportedly explained Tokyo’s willingness to offer financial support to the IAEA if it carries out inspections of DPRK nuclear facilities. Suh plans to pay a courtesy call on Prime Minister Abe today.

In a related analysis piece, Nikkei wrote that the GOJ is apprehensive about the growing mood for rapprochement between the Koreans and between the DPRK and the United States, noting that Japan is distrustful of the Moon administration’s moves to serve as a bridge between Washington and Pyongyang without fully consulting with Tokyo. Japan is worried that rapid reconciliation between the Kim regime and the Moon and the Trump administrations would allow North Korea to buy time to complete its nuclear and missile development and leave the abduction issue unaddressed.

PM Abe to ask President Trump to address abductions

Nikkei took up press remarks made yesterday by Chief Cabinet Secretary Suga, who commented on the proposed summit in April between Prime Minister Abe and President Trump by saying: “We would like to coordinate closely with President Trump so that he can address the abduction issue” in his envisaged meeting with DPRK leader Kim Jong Un. The government spokesman disclosed that when speaking with the U.S. leader by phone last Friday, the premier asked for cooperation in resolving the abduction issue.

SECURITY

Sasebo-based warship to take part in U.S.-ROK drill

Sankei claimed that the U.S. military has decided to send the USS Wasp, a Sasebo-based amphibious assault ship, to participate in joint drills with South Korea that will probably be held in the near future, noting that F-35B fighters may also take part. While projecting that nuclear aircraft carriers probably will not be mobilized for the annual exercises out of consideration for the envisioned summit between President Trump and Kim Jong Un, the daily said the U.S. is still committed to maintaining strong military pressure on Pyongyang by deploying state-of-the-art military equipment for the drills.

