



Morning Alert - Monday, April 16, 2018

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HEADLINES

Morning news

NHK led with a report that today marks the second anniversary of the second major earthquake that hit Kumamoto Prefecture in 2016, saying that about 38,000 people are still living in shelters as a result of the disaster. TV Asahi led with a report on Shohei Ohtani's impressive performance both as a pitcher and a batter for the Los Angeles Angels. TBS reported on Prime Minister Abe's visit to Osaka over the weekend. NTV and Fuji TV led with reports that a member of Kanjani Eight has announced that he will leave the pop group to study music overseas.

Major front-page items in national dailies included Prime Minister Abe's intention to dismiss the vice finance minister for alleged harassment, a Japan-China foreign ministerial meeting held in Tokyo on Sunday, an emergency UN Security Council meeting on Saturday concerning U.S. airstrikes against Syria, and the precipitous drop in support for the Abe cabinet.

INTERNATIONAL

Prime Minister Abe comments on U.S. airstrikes on Syria

All Sunday papers gave prominent front- and inside-page coverage to President Trump's announcement on Friday of U.S. military strikes against select Syrian targets in coordination with the UK and France. Prime Minister Abe reportedly said in response to the attack: "The use of chemical weapons is extremely inhumane and Japan can never accept it. The Japanese government supports the resolve of the United States, France, and the UK not to allow their proliferation and use." He went on to say: "The GOJ understands the airstrikes to be a measure taken to prevent the situation from further deteriorating." The dailies explained that the Japanese leader chose not to endorse the U.S. military action itself in the absence of a UN Security Council resolution and clear evidence proving that the Syrian government used chemical weapons.

Tokyo torn between U.S., Russia over Syria

All Sunday dailies wrote in opinion pieces that while Japan supports the military action against Syria by the U.S. and its two European partners based on the assessment that the airstrikes will serve as a warning to North Korea, it is concerned about the likely deterioration of U.S.-Russia relations because it believes that Moscow will be able to play an important role in applying pressure on the DPRK. Prime Minister Abe also reportedly does not want Japan's ties with Russia to become strained over the Syrian issue since he is keen to maintain a positive relationship with President Putin prior to their planned meeting in Russia in May in order to resolve the Northern Territories dispute. The papers predicted that the Syrian issue will probably be raised during Abe's meeting with President Trump in Mar-a-Lago.

Japanese press divided over use of force against Syria

Asahi, Mainichi, Nikkei, and Tokyo Shimbun ran opinion pieces critical of the military action against Syria by the United States and its two European partners. Asahi claimed it will further prolong and compound the civil war and turmoil in Syria. Kanto-based Tokyo Shimbun said the strikes lacked legitimacy given that the U.S. has failed to provide clear evidence proving the Assad regime's use of chemical weapons and that the UN Security Council did not adopt a resolution authorizing the use of force. Mainichi said President Trump apparently chose to carry out the strikes in a limited manner to avoid a full-scale confrontation with Russia. The daily added that North Korea may be tempted to maintain its nuclear and missile programs following the U.S. military strikes against Syria based on the view that a strong military armed with nuclear weapons will be imperative to head off similar attacks by the Trump administration. Nikkei opined that the Trump administration has yet to present a clear roadmap for peace in Syria.

National Sankei ran an editorial endorsing the U.S. attack since the Syrian people have been repeatedly subjected to chemical weapons attacks and that finding a diplomatic solution has apparently become very difficult. Yomiuri, the largest newspaper in the world, editorialized that the international community must not sit idly by as Syria continues to carry out "reckless acts" that violate international norms. The paper urged President Trump not to disengage from the Middle East, insisting that Russia and Iran would step in to fill the power vacuum created by the U.S.'s disengagement and that such a scenario would embolden the Assad regime to continue conducting inhumane acts.

Japan to propose establishment of mechanism to prevent use of chemical weapons

Today's Nikkei wrote that during the upcoming G7 foreign ministerial meeting to be held in Toronto later this month, Foreign Minister Kono is likely to propose the launch of a mechanism to prevent the use of chemical weapons, with Syria's alleged repeated use of such weapons against its own people in mind.

Senior USG official comments on upcoming U.S.-Japan summit

Saturday evening's Nikkei and Tokyo Shimbun reported on remarks made to the press on Friday by an unnamed high-ranking USG official regarding the planned summit between President Trump and Prime Minister Abe at Mar-a-Lago. The official reportedly indicated that the two leaders will discuss the abduction issue, saying: "Whenever the President thinks about North Korea, the Japanese abductees and Americans who are being held captive illegally there are always on his mind." The official went on to say: "The President has a great deal of respect for the prime minister's views on the security situation in Northeast Asia." He also indicated that the issue of tariffs on Japanese metal products will probably be taken up. The official also reportedly explained that the Trump administration would consider rejoining the TPP if it were modified to benefit the United States.

Monday's Asahi and Mainichi published prominent scene-setting reports on the Mar-a-Lago summit, asserting that it is uncertain whether PM Abe will be able to play up the strong bilateral alliance by "synchronizing" the two nations' views on North Korea since President Trump appears inclined to promote dialogue with the DPRK. The papers projected that Abe will probably be put in a difficult position on the economic front over issues such as the metal tariffs since the Trump administration is taking a hard line on Japan's trade surplus with the U.S. Asahi conjectured that Abe might not ask the President to exempt Japan from the steel tariffs out of fear that the U.S. leader would demand in return measures to further open the Japanese auto and agricultural markets.

U.S., Japan to reject Kim's plan for "phased" approach to denuclearization

Sunday's Tokyo Shimbun took up the disclosure by several sources involved in U.S.-Japan relations that during the Mar-a-Lago summit, Prime Minister Abe and President Trump are likely to agree to reject DPRK leader Kim Jong Un's plan to proceed with denuclearization in a "phased, synchronized" manner in the belief that achieving the "complete, verifiable, and irreversible" denuclearization of North Korea will be difficult if "rewards" are given along the way based on the previous "action for action" principle.

Japan, China agree to improve bilateral relations

All Monday papers reported extensively on a meeting held in Tokyo yesterday between Foreign Minister Kono and his Chinese counterpart Wang, during which they agreed to pursue full-scale improvement in bilateral relations by arranging a trip to Japan by Premier Li for a trilateral summit with South Korea in early May and reciprocal visits to each other's capitals by President Xi and Prime Minister Abe. The two diplomats also forged a consensus on taking a concerted approach toward North Korea and firmly enforcing UN sanctions to press it to abandon its nuclear weapons in a complete, verifiable, and irreversible manner. Kono asked Wang for China's support in resolving the abduction issue. They agreed to pursue the early launch of a communication mechanism between the SDF and the PLA to head off inadvertent clashes in the East China Sea. According to Nikkei, the two ministers also confirmed the importance of upholding a free and open trade system based on WTO rules with the Trump administration's trade policy in mind.

The dailies explained that the Japanese and Chinese governments are eager to strengthen bilateral ties, noting that Abe, in order to draw public attention to his diplomatic accomplishments, aims to have Xi visit Japan at an early date. Beijing is reportedly keen to establish stable ties with Tokyo especially at a time when its relations with Washington are strained over trade friction. The two nations, however, are still at odds over how to achieve North Korea's denuclearization, with Tokyo insisting on maintaining strong pressure while Beijing prefers to promote dialogue.

ECONOMY

U.S. sounds out Japan on launching FTA talks

Monday's Nikkei claimed that the USTR has already proposed to Japan that the two nations begin talks on a bilateral free trade agreement, quoting an unnamed senior USTR official as saying: "We have made repeated requests to Japan for the launch of FTA talks. The only remaining issue is the timing." The paper asserted that the White House is anxious to hold FTA negotiations with Tokyo ahead of the midterm elections in November since the agricultural and other lobbies are strongly demanding such talks. The daily speculated that in pursuing an FTA, the Trump administration may ask Japan to agree to adopt "managed trade," such as a clause designed to deter competitive currency devaluation and voluntary restrictions on auto and other exports. A source connected to the White House reportedly stated: "The U.S. auto industry is calling for measures to curb currency devaluation by Japan."

Abe to propose new framework for economic talks with U.S.

Saturday morning's Nikkei gave top play to a report that Prime Minister Abe apparently plans to propose to President Trump at Mar-a-Lago launching a new framework for discussing economic issues separately from the existing economic dialogue in a bid to encourage the Trump administration to return to the TPP. Based on the Japanese idea, the new framework would be led by USTR Lighthizer and Economic and Fiscal Policy Minister Motegi, who is likely to accompany the premier to Mar-a-Lago. The business daily speculated that even under a new dialogue framework, the U.S. side may demand either the renegotiation of the TPP or the launch of bilateral FTA talks, projecting that in the upcoming summit with the premier, President Trump is likely to ask Abe to take measures to increase U.S. auto and agriculture imports ahead of the November midterm elections. The daily quoted Abe as telling his associates: "While I understand President Trump better than I did a year ago, I feel more pressure ahead of the upcoming summit than the one held a year ago.... I need to make the President understand the importance of North Korea and free trade."

Abe to present Japanese companies' investment plans to President Trump

Saturday morning's Asahi reported that when meeting with President Trump in Florida, Prime Minister Abe is likely to explain the plans being formulated by several Japanese manufacturers, including an automaker, for direct investment in the U.S. The companies are reportedly looking into establishing new production lines and purchasing American businesses. The premier will reportedly

present the plans in anticipation of President Trump's possible criticism of the bilateral trade imbalance. The daily speculated that the Japanese side is hoping that the investment plans will please the President since he appears to be very interested in job creation.

Japanese papers speculate President Trump interested in TPP to please U.S. farmers

All papers on Saturday published prominent reports on President Trump's instructions to USTR Lighthizer and others to look into the possibility of rejoining the TPP, conjecturing that the President may be anxious to please American farmers who are reportedly worried that the President's plan to impose punitive tariffs on Chinese imports may backfire by prompting Beijing to adopt retaliatory duties on American agricultural products. The papers highlighted a statement issued by Senator Sasse from Nebraska, who said: "The best thing the United States can do to push back against Chinese cheating now is to lead the other eleven Pacific nations that believe in free trade and the rule of law. It is good news that the President directed Larry Kudlow and Ambassador Lighthizer to negotiate U.S. entry into TPP."

The papers opined that the President may need to court these voters ahead of the midterm elections. They also said although the GOJ has welcomed the U.S. leader's renewed interest in the TPP, it is determined to reject requests for renegotiation out of concern that the President may press the current 11 members to make concessions to allow more U.S. imports. The GOJ is also reportedly afraid that renegotiations would delay the effectuation of the accord.

Treasury Department places Japan on currency watch list

All national papers reported over the weekend that the Treasury Department released on Friday its semi-annual report to Congress on the currency policies of U.S. trading partners, noting that it placed Japan, China, Germany, and three other nations on a "monitoring list" for special attention. As the USG document expressed concern about the "persistence of this large bilateral trade imbalance between the United States and Japan," the dailies forecast that President Trump may use the Treasury report to press Prime Minister Abe at Mar-a-Lago to agree to the launch of bilateral FTA talks as a measure to reduce U.S. trade deficit with Japan.

Japan, China to discuss U.S. metal tariffs

Saturday's Sankei reported that during their planned high-level economic dialogue in Tokyo on Monday, the governments of Japan and China will probably exchange views on the Trump administration's imposition of tariffs on foreign steel and aluminum imports. The paper wrote that because Japan, like the United States, takes issue with the oversupply of Chinese steel, it is uncertain whether the two nations will be able to take a concerted approach toward the metal tariffs.

POLITICS

Top finance official to be dismissed over harassment scandal

Today's Sankei reported that Prime Minister Abe has informally decided to relieve Vice Finance Minister Fukuda of his duties so as to hold him responsible for allegedly harassing female reporters by using offensive language. Although Finance Minister Aso had earlier ruled out the possibility of dismissing the vice minister, Abe has reportedly concluded that the allegation is serious enough to warrant his dismissal at a time when the powerful ministry and his administration have been rocked by a spate of scandals.

Support for Abe remains weak

According to the results of the latest public opinion survey published by today's Asahi, support for the Abe cabinet remained the same as in the previous month at 31%, whereas nonsupport rose by four points to 52%, a record high. Some 66% said they cannot trust the prime minister's explanations on the Moritomo and Kake Gakuen scandals. The latest Kyodo poll put support for the Abe administration at 37%, down 5.4 points from two weeks ago, and nonsupport at 52.6%, up 5.1 points.

SECURITY

Ospreys depart Yokota for overseas training

All Saturday morning papers except Yomiuri and Sankei reported that five CV-22 Ospreys left Yokota AB on Friday to conduct training overseas. According to Tokyo Shimbun, a base spokesperson reportedly said: "They will take part in drills in the Pacific area and return to Yokota after several months."

