

THE NEWS QUIZ

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Nine hurt as cops, laborers clash

OSAKA (Kyodo) Nine people were slightly injured and 10 were arrested after more than 200 day laborers and their supporters surrounded an Osaka police station until early Saturday to protest the way officers handled an unemployed man. The laborers and supports gathered in front of the Osaka Prefectural Police's Nishinari Station after 5 p.m. Friday. Some of them later began to throw stones, empty bottles and fire extinguishers at the station. The police deployed about 100 riot squad officers in front of the station, and both sides began pushing each other. Nine people — eight of them police officers — sustained minor injuries, while 10 men and women were arrested on the spot on suspicion of unlawfully entering a police station and obstructing police from performing their duties, the police said. Those arrested included a 16-year-old high school student, who was later released. Part of Osaka's Nishinari Ward is known as an area where many day laborers and homeless people live. According to the police, a 54-year-old unemployed man living in a nearby apartment got into a dispute Thursday with a clerk at a restaurant in Nishinari Ward and was taken to the police station. Dissatisfied with the way the police handled the situation, the man consulted a laborer support group in the area Friday. Members of the support group distributed fliers saying, "Don't forgive violent police officers," and day laborers began surrounding the police station. The man said the police did not listen to his side of the story and punched him. Keiji Miyashita, deputy chief of Nishinari Police Station, said the officers did not take any violent action and handled the man's case appropriately.

Lawmakers form group to tackle touchy tobacco issues

Lawmakers formed a nonpartisan group Friday to discuss the issues surrounding tobacco, including tax revenue and health risks, amid calls by some to triple the price of a pack of smokes to ¥1,000. Influential politicians are in the group, including former Liberal Democratic Party Secretary General Hidenao Nakagawa and ex-Democratic Party of Japan President Seiji Maehara. At its inaugural meeting, members said they were aiming to draft an action outline during the extraordinary Diet session expected in the fall, when debate on major tax reforms is expected to ensue. "As Diet members, we need to consider tobacco issues from the viewpoint of the public's health and medical care," said Nakagawa, who admitted being a heavy smoker. Nakagawa said tobacco issues need to be discussed from a broad perspective, encompassing issues like raising cigarette prices and decreasing the number of smokers, cutting medical costs and increasing tax revenue. Nakagawa raised eyebrows after reportedly suggesting a tobacco tax hike that would lift the price of one pack to ¥1,000, or more than three times the current price. Maehara said the emphasis on prices is misplaced. "I think too much interest has turned to cigarette prices," he said. "The discussion on tobacco did not begin with (how to increase) revenue and 'let's collect money from where we can.'" The tobacco industry in Japan was monopolized by the government until 1985, when it was privatized. But the Finance Ministry continues to be Japan Tobacco Inc.'s largest shareholder, owning 50.02 percent of its stock. Too much attention on "raising tobacco prices could result in a sharp fall in Japan Tobacco stock, damaging the government's share," Maehara said. Such a drastic hike in tobacco prices is sure to trigger protests from the company, as well as smokers and farmers. But protests may be fruitless, said DPJ lawmaker Yoko Komiyama.

White paper urges greater role for women

A government white paper on gender equality released Friday calls on the public sector to help women advance into leading roles in society. Noting the relatively slight presence of female leaders in society, the 2008 white paper says women make up only 10.1 percent of the leadership of parent-teacher associations. "Taking advantage of women's will and ability would be very fruitful for regional communities that are currently saddled with various problems," the report says. According to the paper, females represent only 0.9 percent of mayors and other municipal heads in Japan, 10.5 percent of local assembly members and 3.8 percent of resident-association chiefs. The report cites the inadequacy of childbirth, child-rearing and nursing-care support as the main reason behind women's lack of advancement in the academic community.

Consumer Agency moves a step nearer

An expert council on policy finalized a plan Friday to create a new government entity to be called the Consumer Agency in fiscal 2009. The council submitted a report detailing the framework of the planned agency to handle consumer affairs to Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda, who unveiled the proposal for the agency in April. The Consumer Agency will be granted strong authority on consumer policy, and 30 laws relating to four consumer areas — product labeling, commercial transactions, product safety, and prices and livelihood — will come under its auspices, according to the report. Set up as an external organ of the Cabinet Office, the Consumer Agency will act as "the control tower" of the administration of consumer affairs, the report says, adding it is designed to shift consumer policy from a probusiness to a more consumer-oriented one. Acting on the final report, the government will work out the new agency's framework, detailing schedules for the transfer of jurisdiction of laws under the new body so the plan can be endorsed by the end of June. The government plans to submit a bill to set up the new agency during an extraordinary Diet session that may convene in August so the agency can be inaugurated next spring. Moves to integrate consumer-related activities, which are currently handled by different government ministries and agencies, come in the wake of a recent spate of food mislabeling incidents, faulty products and other problems, including the outbreak of food poisoning involving Chinese "gyoza" dumplings, over which the ministries and agencies were criticized for their slow initial response. According to the report, the Consumer Agency will be inaugurated with an initial staff of about 200 under a minister. The report says the agency will be empowered to design, execute and coordinate consumer policies and unify contract offices for consumers. The agency will also be empowered to recommend remedial measures against problematic companies or individuals, the report says. The government will consider legal action to help victims of fraud and other illicit commercial activities, including seizing profits earned via such activities and enabling the state to sue on behalf of the victims. The agency will also handle the nation's price policy, including revising utility rates, by having laws and regulations transferred to it from the Cabinet Office. In view of the lukewarm government response to food-related problems in the past, new legislation will be established requiring municipal-run consumer centers to immediately report life-threatening cases to the Consumer Agency. Experts will be named for a special committee to be set up at the agency, a move meant to have consumers' views reflected in national policy.

United Arab Emirates to get Tottori watermelons

TOTTORI (Kyodo) A ceremony was held Friday at a watermelon market in the town of Hokuei, Tottori Prefecture, to mark Japan's first export of premium watermelons to the United Arab Emirates. But the watermelons produced in Hokuei are a local specialty — a premium fruit that will be sold for about ¥30,000 each. The cargo of 54 watermelons, each weighing more than 12 kg and measuring about 30 cm in diameter, will be shipped from Narita airport Saturday and arrive in Dubai via Hong Kong around Sunday midnight, local agricultural cooperative officials said. The watermelons, which have sugar concentrations of 12 percent or more, will be sold at upscale department stores during a trial period in the oil-rich country, they said. The UAE imports watermelons from neighboring countries, including Iran, but an official of Tottori Prefecture's market development bureau said interest in Japanese watermelons is increasing in the country. "Wealthy groups of people in Dubai have a high interest in safe and healthy food. Considering the quality of Japanese agricultural products, they are sellable." An official of the Japan Agricultural Cooperatives of Tottori said, "We would like to aim for a well-established export line benefiting from the booming economy of Dubai."

Let 10% of Japan be foreigners: Nakagawa

Liberal Democratic Party lawmakers made an ambitious proposal Thursday to raise the ratio of immigrants in Japan to about 10 percent over the next 50 years. The frankness of the suggestion reflects the seriousness of Japan's population decline, which is marked by a rapid increase in the elderly population and a falling birthrate that threatens to undermine future economic growth. "There is no effective cure to save Japan from a population crisis," the proposal said. "In order for Japan to survive, it must open its doors as an international state to the world and shift toward establishing an 'immigrant nation' by accepting immigrants and revitalizing Japan." Headed by ex-LDP Secretary General Hidenao Nakagawa, the group of about 80 lawmakers drafted a "Japanese-model immigration policy" that they plan to submit to Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda next week. The group said its definition of "immigrant" is the same as that used by the United Nations, and can count individuals who have lived outside their home countries for more than 12 months. This includes asylum-seekers, people on state or corporate training programs, and even exchange students. In what might be the government's first time using the word "immigrant" in this context, the proposal calls for enacting a law that specifies Japan's basic principles and policies on immigrants. It also says immigration policy should place importance on nurturing the talent of newcomers, adding that providing more education and training opportunities is indispensable. In addition, an "immigration agency" should be set up within three years to unify the management of foreigner-related affairs, including legal issues such as nationality and immigration control. "This (proposal) covers a wide range of issues that need to be taken care of both in the short term and the long term, but as members of the legislature, we're determined to make the necessary changes to the law," Nakagawa said, noting the group will ask its peers in the ruling and opposition camps for their support. "We're going to move swiftly." According to Immigration Bureau data, the number of registered foreigners in Japan set a record high of about 2.08 million in 2006. Among them, permanent residents have continued to grow, reaching 837,000, or 40 percent, of all registered foreigners in 2006. Hirohiko Nakamura, an Upper House lawmaker and secretary general of the LDP group, said increasing the recognition of refugees is also on their agenda. The group proposes accepting up to 1,000 asylum-seekers and other foreigners who need protection for humanitarian reasons. The proposal also said a foreigner who has lived in Japan for 10 years or longer should be given nationality if the person wishes to become a Japanese citizen. The group also says citizenship should be given to all permanent residents.

Loan shark must pay more damages

The Supreme Court ordered a loan shark Tuesday to compensate his customers for both the principal and the illegally exorbitant interest rates he charged, overruling a high court decision. Susumu Kajiyama, the operator of a gangster-linked moneylender, had previously been ordered to compensate the 11 plaintiffs only for interest, but the presiding judge, Justice Kohei Nasu of the top court's Third Petty Bench, sent the case back to the Takamatsu High Court, ordering it to recalculate the award to include the principal. The decision by the five-justice panel, the first of its kind, was made in response to an appeal filed by 11 people in Ehime Prefecture who sought around ¥35 million in compensation from the 58-year-old Kajiyama, who is serving time for money laundering and usury. In June 2006, the Matsuyama District Court ordered Kajiyama to pay about ¥3.6 million in compensation to seven of the 11 plaintiffs. The Takamatsu High Court overruled that decision in December that year, ordering Kajiyama to pay about ¥14 million to all 11 borrowers. Sakae Hashizume, 49, who borrowed ¥30,000 and ended up repaying ¥9.8 million, welcomed the ruling. "Victims are in agony in trying to come up with the repayment and they even try to commit suicide," she said. "I am overwhelmed." Kajiyama, formerly a senior member of the Goryo-kai, a group affiliated with Japan's largest underworld syndicate, the Kobe-based Yamaguchi-gumi, was once called a loan shark tycoon in Japan. According to the lawsuit, the plaintiffs borrowed money from a lender linked with the Goryo-kai at an annual interest rate of more than 1,000 percent but faced threats and coercive action during collection. The plaintiffs argued that the loan contracts themselves were invalid and demanded ¥35 million in principal, interest and compensation for mental anguish, as well as punitive damages for unethical practices. Earlier this year, Japan and Switzerland reached an agreement to divide some 58 million Swiss francs (about \$57 million or ¥6 billion at current exchange rates) seized by Swiss authorities from a bank account related to the Goryo-kai, with the portion due Japan to be returned to loan-shark victims.

Japan's south draws South Koreans; Taiwanese go north

South Korean tourists tend to visit southern Japan, particularly for golfing, while Taiwanese like to go north for the ice and snow, according to the government white paper on tourism for fiscal 2007. Overall, Japan attracted a record high 8.35 million visitors from abroad in 2007, resetting the record books for a fourth consecutive year. South Koreans accounted for about 30 percent of the total, or 2.6 million, followed by Taiwanese at 1.39 million, Chinese at 940,000 and Americans at 820,000, the white paper says. South Koreans tended to gravitate to 19 prefectures, including seven in Kyushu, while Taiwanese went to Hokkaido, Iwate and Miyagi prefectures, as well as areas in the Hokuriku region along the Sea of Japan, according to the report.

IAEA found Japan-made pump in N. Korean nuke facility

YOKOHAMA (Kyodo) Police have raided a manufacturing company in Kanagawa Prefecture after the International Atomic Energy Agency said it found a Japanese-made vacuum pump at a nuclear facility in North Korea last year, sources said Thursday. Kanagawa police searched Tokyo Vacuum, the maker of the pump, and trade agent Nakano Corp. of Minato Ward, Tokyo, in early June on suspicion that the pump, used in a uranium enrichment device, was shipped to North Korea via Taiwan, the sources said. Following the U.N. nuclear watchdog's report of its finding to the Japanese government, police raided the two firms on suspicion of unauthorized export in violation of the foreign trade law, they said. By law, exports of devices that can be diverted for use in making weapons of mass destruction must be approved in advance by the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry. But the two firms exported several vacuum pumps to Taiwan in summer 2003 without approval. Police suspect the Taiwanese trading firm that imported the pumps shipped at least one of them to North Korea. They have dispatched officers to Taiwan to investigate. The firm was not identified. A Tokyo Vacuum spokesman claimed the company did not know the device would be used in North Korea's nuclear facility, without adding further comment on the illegal export. Nakano Corp. confirmed it was searched by police and also said it had no knowledge the device would be exported to North Korea.