

The News Quiz

Headlines

Earthquake will pack millions in tight areas

Police to film reading of interrogation logs

Back-seat riders to be bound by seat-belt law

Picture

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Logo time.

News Maker



Who are they? And why were they in the news last week?

Missing Words

20 teachers punished over [redacted] row

Japan No. [redacted] ODA donor: OECD

[redacted] halts reactor

Osaka theater to screen '[redacted]'

[redacted] could do work of 3.5 million people by '25

Twenty public school teachers were punished for disobeying an order to stand and face the flag during the singing of the national anthem in graduation ceremonies in March, the Tokyo board of education said Monday. The punishments ranged from a 10 percent salary cut for between one and six months to six-month suspensions from work and nonrenewal of contracts for temporary or part-time workers. The board decided on the penalties during a meeting Friday. The board has been punishing teachers since ordering public school principals in October 2003 to instruct teachers and students to stand and sing "Kimigayo" at graduation and entrance ceremonies. About 400 teachers have been punished so far. There was speculation this year that Kimiko Nezu, a home economics teacher at Minamiosawa Gakuen School for Children With Special Needs, might be dismissed for having defied the order since October 2003. Instead, she was suspended Monday for six months. "Pushing just one view (onto people) must not happen in a democratic society," Nezu said. Forcing children to sing the anthem without telling them about its history or the history of the Hinomaru flag is not education, she added. Nezu had been punished several times over the years for remaining seated during the anthem. The penalty has become more severe each time. "I assumed I would be dismissed this year," said Nezu, who was punished not only for disobeying the order but also for wearing a sweater at her school emblazoned with the phrase "Objection Hinomaru, Kimigayo." She speculated that the significant public support she has received stopped the board from dismissing her this year. Nezu, other defiant teachers and their supporters have actively protested the order over the past two months. "I felt that when many people take some action together, things can be changed," Nezu said during a news conference. "It's been proved today that no matter how many times you remain seated, you won't be fired," she said.

Nova successor claims other schools poaching students

OSAKA (Kyodo) G.education, the company running some of the operations of the bankrupt language school chain Nova Corp., has sent letters to six English-language schools demanding they stop interfering in its business through preferential offers, sources said Tuesday. The letters, sent in the name of President Hideo Sugimoto, say the company, a unit of G.communication, "will not hesitate to take legal action if no response is received." Once the nation's largest private language school chain, with around 1,000 branches and nearly 500,000 students, Nova went bust last year due to liquidity and tuition payment plan problems after the government ordered it to halt part of its operations over insufficient refunds to students who had canceled contracts. Although Nova's failure put thousands of its students and teachers in limbo, it also provided vast business opportunities to other schools. In late November, right after Nova applied for rehabilitation, the receiver of Nova asked the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry to make arrangements for other schools to accept Nova students. The letters were sent to companies that offered support to students at that request. "We are not actively soliciting students," said an official at one of the companies contacted. "They (G.education) may be facing difficulties because students are not returning to them." G.education criticized schools that have accepted students and is asking them to take action within one week, according to the Japan Association for the Promotion of Foreign Language Education, which counts 70 language school operators as members. G.education has stated, "Acts of advertising and solicitation through such means as awarding perks hinder our company's marketing activities." The language association and other industry bodies announced they would accept students at the request of the ministry. Masami Sakurabayashi, secretary general of the association, denied interfering with Nova. "We have been taking action in line with the request and that is not tantamount to business interference," Sakurabayashi said. "When the entire industry is working to regain public confidence, confrontation is not desirable."

Mitsukoshi, Isetan join; eye record industry sales

Mitsukoshi Ltd. and Isetan Co. integrated their managements Tuesday under a holding company to create Japan's largest department store group, with an annual sales target of ¥1.54 trillion. If the sales target for the just-started business year through next March is achieved, it would be the largest-ever in the industry. The creation of Isetan Mitsukoshi Holdings Ltd. comes at a time when the department store industry is facing falling sales amid the graying population and harsh competition from other retailing businesses. The merger is the latest in a series of realignment moves in the industry, including the integrations between Daimaru Inc. and Matsuzakaya Holdings Co. in September, and between Hankyu Department Stores Inc. and Hanshin Department Stores Ltd. in October. The new company aims to survive the harsh business environment by seeking synergy through Isetan's strength in appealing to young customers and Mitsukoshi's ability to attract a relatively upscale clientele. Before the opening at 10 a.m. of Mitsukoshi's flagship store in Tokyo's Nihombashi district, about 2,000 people had already formed a long line, with many hoping to buy special items offered to commemorate the two department stores' integration. Mitsukoshi and Isetan will retain their respective time-honored names. Mitsukoshi President Kunio Ishizuka will assume the presidency of Isetan Mitsukoshi Holdings, while Isetan President Nobukazu Muto is to take the post of chairman at the holding company. One of the key challenges the new holding company faces is to turn around the loss-making Mitsukoshi stores.

About 4.75 million commuters would be squeezed into small areas — as if they were on a packed train — while trying to walk home if a quake measuring upper 6 on the Japanese seismic intensity scale to 7 rocks the Tokyo metropolitan area, according to a government simulation under certain situations. Of the masses who may have to walk home, about 2 million would be forced onto packed streets for more than three hours, a panel of the Cabinet Office's Central Disaster Prevention Council said Wednesday. In the event of a powerful temblor in Tokyo, the 4.75 million could be so tightly packed — possibly six people or more crammed into an area of 1 sq. meter — that they would be at risk of falling like dominoes. According to the simulation, such congestion would first emerge in Chiyoda, Chuo and Minato wards immediately after the quake. About three hours later, the crowding would become most serious and would spread to wider areas, including Shinjuku, the area around the Imperial Palace and Setagaya Ward. The simulation showed it would take some 15 hours to walk from the Marunouchi business district to Wako, Saitama Prefecture, three times longer than at a normal walking pace. It would take about 15 hours to walk to Yokohama, twice as long as a normal pace. Wako is about 20 km from Marunouchi, while Yokohama is some 30 km away. The government plans steps to deal with such situations by the end of the current fiscal year, including ways to ensure safety of evacuees and smooth movement of emergency vehicles.

Japan No. 5 ODA donor: OECD

Japan slipped two spots to fifth place among foreign aid donors in 2007 based on calculations by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, falling at a faster pace than expected, government sources said Wednesday. The ranking, to be officially announced Friday by the OECD Development Assistance Committee, is expected to take a bite out of Japan's diplomatic clout and its hopes to demonstrate leadership when hosting the Group of Eight summit in July, where development will be one of the key issues on the agenda. In contrast with Japan's continued cuts of its official development assistance budget in recent years, European countries have increased aid efforts, especially to Africa. France and Germany are believed to have surpassed Japan in 2007. Japan topped the United States as the world's largest donor from 1991 to 2000 but then fell to second in 2001 and dropped to third when it was overtaken by Britain in 2006. That was the first time Japan ranked third or lower since 1982, when it placed fourth. According to the OECD, Japan's net ODA in 2006 was \$11.2 billion, a 9.1 percent decrease in real terms from 2005. The fall to fifth place came earlier than expected. In February, then Development Assistance Committee Chairman Richard Manning predicted it would take place in 2010. There are also predictions that Japan will be surpassed by Italy and rank sixth in 2010. With the figures to be announced just ahead of this weekend's G8 development ministers meeting, Japan is expected to face strong pressure as it seeks to reaffirm with member nations the commitment to carry out aid pledges to developing nations. Japan, along with Britain, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Russia and the U.S., committed at the G8 summit in 2005 to increase aid. Then Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi pledged an extra \$10 billion in assistance over five years to 2009. Representatives of aid recipient nations have often complained about shortfalls on implementing the aid pledges by donors that include Japan, which will also host the Fourth Tokyo International Conference on African Development in May.

Climber to G8: Fight Himalaya thaw

Noted mountaineer Ken Noguchi is urging leaders of the Group of Eight to take up the issue of swiftly melting glaciers in the Himalayas caused by global warming when they meet in Japan in July for their annual summit. There are 15,000 glaciers and 9,000 glacial lakes in the Himalayas but at least 200 of the lakes are on the verge of overflowing due to an increased volume of water from melting glaciers, already causing floods in Nepal, Bhutan and India, Noguchi told a press conference Tuesday at the Environment Ministry. Noguchi, 34, proposed a research plan for the glacial lakes in the area and making evacuation maps for residents there. "I want the crisis of Himalayan glaciers to be widely recognized. I hope Toyako will trigger the start of action for countermeasures," Noguchi said, referring to the G8 summit to be held in Hokkaido's Lake Toya hot springs resort. Noguchi is scheduled to visit in April and May a glacial lake in Nepal that is in the most critical condition and will report on his findings when he attends a symposium during the G8 environment ministers' meeting in Kobe in late May. According to Noguchi, he and actress Mayumi Waamura, who also attended the press conference, will conduct and lead simultaneous cleanups at Mount Fuji and Mount Everest for the second year in a row on April 19.

Hydrogen-release spike halts reactor

KANAZAWA, Ishikawa Pref. (Kyodo) Hokuriku Electric Power Co. suspended the operation of the No. 2 reactor of its nuclear power plant in the town of Shika, Ishikawa Prefecture, for inspection Wednesday as the concentration of hydrogen emitted outdoors increased, the utility said. On Tuesday, the hydrogen concentration at the No. 2 reactor increased to 4 percent from the normal level of 2 percent or less, activating the alarm system. The company lowered the output power and continued operations, but decided to inspect the reactor to ensure safety, officials said. The suspension came just after the reactor resumed operations in late March following a hiatus since July 2006 due to cracks in turbine blades.

Osaka theater to screen 'Yasukuni'

OSAKA (Kyodo) A movie theater in Osaka said Thursday it will screen "Yasukuni," the contentious documentary by Chinese director Li Ying about the war-related shrine, in early May. The decision by the Seventh Art Theater in Yodogawa Ward came after several cinemas decided to cancel or postpone screening the film, originally scheduled to begin in early May, fearing pressure from political groups and others. Although more than 10 theaters are considering showing "Yasukuni," this is the first to announce it will proceed as scheduled, according to one of the film's distributors. The 96-seat theater, funded by local shop owners, has received many calls and e-mails urging it to show the film. "Movie theaters are closely connected to the people, and they should be the place where people see films, think about them and begin various discussions and debate," said Atsushi Matsumura, 46, manager of the Seventh Art Theater. "We'd like to respond to the many voices asking us to screen the film." The film, without narration, tells the stories of people involved with Yasukuni who hold different views about the war and the Shinto shrine. The 123-minute film won a best-documentary award at the 32nd Hong Kong International Film Festival. It has also been shown at international film festivals in South Korea, Germany and the U.S. So far, six cinemas in Tokyo, Osaka and Nagoya have decided to cancel or postpone screening "Yasukuni" following an unprecedented preview of the film by lawmakers in Tokyo at the request of Liberal Democratic Party Diet members. "Cinemas in places such as Tokyo have canceled screenings, but we would like to show the film eventually," said an official of Nagoya Cinematheque, which decided to delay its May 3 showing. The official declined comment on whether the cinema was pressured by political or rightwing groups into not screening the film. Some of the theaters that dropped out simply cited the potential "inconvenience" that showing the film might cause to viewers and neighboring businesses. One of the major reasons for the cancellations is thought to be the noisy street campaigns staged by rightists with loudspeaker trucks. On Tuesday, the Mass Media Information and Culture Union issued a protest, stating: "This is an unusual situation in which political pressure and hindrance by rightwing groups is about to thwart film screenings and a movie is about to be crushed. It's absolutely unforgivable." The lawmakers who requested the special preview, including Tomomi Inada, a House of Representatives member of the LDP, said they wanted to evaluate whether it was entitled to receive the ¥7.5 million subsidy from the Cultural Affairs Agency.

The National Police Agency formalized a plan Thursday to partially film and record the reading of interrogation logs to suspected murderers and robbers, a move lawyers claim will not lead to any greater transparency in a questioning process that has been blamed for forced confessions. The plan, endorsed by the National Public Safety Commission, is designed to verify the credibility of interrogation records and thus prevent wrongful accusations stemming from forced confessions. It will be introduced first at the Metropolitan Police Department this summer and later at Osaka and other major prefectural forces, ahead of the scheduled launch next year of the lay judge system, which will mostly handle murder and other serious crimes. The recording procedure will be mainly applied to cases in which suspects may retract their confessions at the trial stage. The recording will focus on the reading of the interrogation reports to suspects. Lawyers have criticized the new system, saying it will not make interrogations transparent. The Japan Federation of Bar Associations is calling for the recording of the entire interrogation process, not just part of it, saying too much discretion is given to interrogators in selecting which parts are to be recorded and shown in court. "A recording is for the purpose of detecting forced confessions. A partial recording is nonsense," said Masashi Akita, a lawyer with the federation's task force on achieving transparency in interrogations. The NPA was initially cautious about the video and audio recording of interrogations but has decided to act in concert with prosecutors. The practice has already been adopted on a trial basis at various prosecutors' offices. Under the system, police will inform suspects that the questioning will be recorded, when doing so is deemed necessary. No recordings will be made if the suspect does not give consent. Crimes involving the underworld will be excluded from the plan due to fears that suspects who speak to police may face retaliation. The recordings will be carried out when interrogators read the interrogation reports in front of the suspects. They will be asked if there are mistakes in the reports and asked to sign the reports. The recordings will display the time that has elapsed during the interrogation session to the second to prevent possible editing by authorities. Prosecutors introduced the recording practice for some criminal cases in August 2006. A project team from the ruling coalition proposed last month that police follow suit. The lay judge system debuts in May 2009 as part of judicial system reforms.

Robots could be performing the work of 3.52 million people by 2025 to help cover a labor shortage in the graying society, an industry body said Thursday. The Machine Industry Memorial Foundation has estimated that "working robots" under development by Honda Motor Co. and many other leading companies could take over about 970,000 jobs in medical and nursing care services. In the agriculture and forestry sector, 450,000 jobs could be held by robots if harvesting and pruning robots spread widely, according to the foundation, an affiliate of the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry. In services such as cleaning and delivery, robots could do the jobs of 1.41 million people. It projects that 74 minutes of free time per household could be created each day by robots that do household chores such as cleaning. This could help more women enter the labor market, the foundation said. Japan could face a labor shortage of 4.27 million people in 2025 on the back of the declining birthrate and mass retirement of baby boomers, but the foundation's projections indicate that about 80 percent of the labor shortage could be covered if advanced robots become popular. The government has been considering using more foreign workers and retired people to address these issues.

Butter supplies running short at supermarkets

Consumers are facing a double whammy as butter supplies are running short — sometimes even disappearing from supermarket shelves around Japan — and producers are planning to raise prices.

Supermarkets and other retailers are suffering the butter shortages mainly because domestic production of raw milk has been reduced in the last few years due to sluggish demand for milk. Increases in feed costs stemming from surging global grain prices have meanwhile made it difficult for dairy farmers to boost raw milk production by increasing the number of cows. A sign put up recently by a supermarket in Shinagawa Ward, Tokyo, said "Today there will be no arrival of goods." In recent days it has not been unusual for the store to run out of all butter products. "Products arrive only once a week," a sales clerk said. "All products sell out on the day of arrival." Consumers will be hit not only by the supply shortage but also by planned hikes in butter prices. Dairy companies such as Snow Brand Milk Products Co., Yotsuba Inc. and Morinaga Milk Industry Co. plan to raise their suggested retail prices for butter by 8 percent to 10 percent either this month or in May. According to the Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries Ministry, domestic production of butter from last April to January dropped 4.5 percent from the year before in volume terms. Butter inventories at dairy companies have fallen 20 percent from a year before.

"It would be difficult to raise supplies of butter sharply any time soon," a ministry official said.

Shortages have been conspicuous since late last year, when demand for butter as an ingredient in cakes increased. Reflecting the shortages, prices of butter for business use are also surging, making it difficult for some restaurants to offer bread with butter. Domestic raw milk producers have reduced production after facing a glut stemming from a plunge in milk consumption. Another factor reducing butter supplies is expanding demand for dairy products in China. Also, raw milk demand for cheese production is rising in Japan. An official at Yotsuba, which holds the second-biggest share of the domestic butter market, said it would be difficult to boost shipments immediately. "Even if producers increase the number of milk cows, it will take two years for cows to mature to the point they can provide milk," the official said.