

Japanese Prime Minister Abe Reshuffles Cabinet



Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (L) talks with his party's lawmaker Shinjiro Koizumi, son of former Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi, in Tokyo on September 28, 2017.

TOKYO (AFP) -- Japan's Shinzo Abe Wednesday appointed new foreign and defense ministers and promoted a popular rising political star, in a cabinet reshuffle that fuelled speculation over the prime minister's successor.

The spectacular appointment as environment minister of the telegenic Shinjiro Koizumi, the 38-year-old son of much-loved former PM Junichiro, set tongues wagging in Tokyo political classes as the Abe era draws to a close.

"Abe intends to start an open race to pick the next prime minister or even the one after that," said SMBC Nikko

Securities chief market economist Yoshimasa Maruyama.

A darling of the Japanese media, Koizumi is the third-youngest minister appointed to the cabinet in Japan since the end of World War II, in a country where seniority is prized in politics and many other walks of life.

Despite intense media spotlight, he has been coy on expressing his view on the issues of the day and there will be close scrutiny over his policies on nuclear power, particularly on whether he will break with his father's anti-nuclear stance.

"I hope Mr Shinjiro Koizumi will

tackle global issues such as ocean plastics and climate change not with worn-out approaches but with the new ideas of the young generation," Abe said.

Abe is set to become Japan's longest-serving prime minister in November but is expected to step down at the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) leadership election in 2021 and the jostling for position is already beginning.

He reiterated his long-cherished ambition of amending Japan's post-war constitution to change the status of the country's Self Defense Forces.

The Abe government is poised to hike its consumption tax from eight percent to 10 percent on October 1, amid fears this could act as a brake on the world's third-largest economy.

Japan's new foreign minister is Toshimitsu Motegi, who was promoted as a reward for his work in negotiating a trade deal with the United States, which he will continue.

Outgoing foreign minister Taro Kono was shifted to the defense portfolio, in a move seen as reinforcing Tokyo's hard line towards South Korea at a time of worsening ties between the two neighbors.

Kono, who has amused commentators by interacting with people on social media -- even offering relationship advice at times -- struck a hard line during the recent spat with Seoul that has infected their trade and security ties.

Scotland Deals Fresh Blow to Johnson's Brexit Plan



Protesters gathered outside the court of session in Edinburgh last week as judges heard the case.

EDINBURGH (AFP) -- British Prime Minister Boris Johnson suffered a fresh blow Wednesday when a Scottish court ruled that his controversial decision to suspend parliament in the run-up to Brexit was unlawful.

The government immediately appealed, with the case set to be heard in the Supreme Court next Tuesday, and parliament set to remain shut in the meantime.

Johnson says the decision to suspend -- or prorogue -- parliament until October 14 is a routine move allowing his government to launch a new legislative agenda.

But critics accuse him of trying to silence parliamentary opposi-

tion to his threat to leave the European Union on October 31 even if he has failed to agree divorce terms with Brussels.

If Johnson fails to secure a deal he insists the country will leave anyway, to the outrage of many MPs who believe a "no deal" exit would bring huge disruption.

After the legal ruling, the opposition Labour party demanded that Johnson urgently recall parliament, which was suspended for five weeks on Tuesday.

However, a government source told AFP that "nothing is changing" until the case was concluded.

The case, brought by 78 British lawmakers, was rejected by a

Scottish lower court last week but was overturned Wednesday by the Inner House, Scotland's supreme civil court.

It found that Johnson's advice to Queen Elizabeth II to prorogue parliament "was unlawful because it had the purpose of stymying parliament", a summary judgment said.

A British government spokesman said: "We are disappointed by today's decision, and will appeal to the UK Supreme Court.

"The UK government needs to bring forward a strong domestic legislative agenda. Proroguing parliament is the legal and necessary way of delivering this."

He noted a separate legal challenge to prorogation brought at the High Court in London last week had failed.

Labour's Brexit spokesman Keir Starmer welcomed the ruling, saying: "No one in their right mind believed Boris Johnson's reason for shutting down parliament.

"I urge the prime minister to immediately recall parliament so we can debate this judgment and decide what happens next."

Scotland's first minister, Scottish National Party (SNP) leader Nicola Sturgeon, echoed his call.

"The immediate political implications are clear... parliament must be recalled immediately to allow the essential work of scrutiny to continue," she tweeted.

China to Build Telecom Towers on Bases in Philippines

MANILA (Dispatches) -- The Philippine military agreed on Wednesday to allow a new cellphone network powered by a Chinese state telecoms giant to install communications equipment on its army bases.

The military said in a statement it had signed a preliminary agreement with Mislattel, a consortium controlled by Philippine tycoon Dennis Uy, to install communications facilities and towers at its camps and installations.

Uy, a close associate of President Rodrigo Duterte, was awarded the country's third telecoms license last year, helped by the last-minute withdrawal or disqualification of other bidders.

His two holding companies, which have no prior experience in telecommunications, have partnered with China Telecom, which currently owns a 40% stake, the maximum permitted under an archaic Philippine law that the government has promised to amend to support foreign investment.

The agreement comes despite calls for deeper scrutiny from some Philippine lawmakers concerned that state-controlled China Telecom could be a "Trojan horse" with the capability to access state secrets.

It comes at a time of heightened cyber security hype being

waged by Washington surrounding Chinese national icon Huawei Technologies, the world's largest telecommunications equipment maker, which has been placed on a U.S. trade blacklist since May.

Washington has been urging its allies, Manila included, not to use Huawei gear, claiming that the Beijing government could use it for espionage, an allegation Huawei has denied.

In a statement, the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) said Mislattel "guarantees that the devices, equipment, and/or structures installed at the site provided by the AFP shall not be used to obtain classified information" as a measure to prevent electronic espionage.

It noted that the AFP had a similar arrangement with the other two domestic mobile firms, Globe Telecom and rival PLDT.

The move aims to free-up state land to construct towers to try to address a shortfall that has for years resulted in intermittent signals, patchy coverage and dropped calls, with the country's two networks inundated with traffic among the country's 107 million population. Globe and PLDT blame excessive permit requirements for slowing their network expansion.

Mugabe's Body Arrives in Zimbabwe for Burial



Zimbabweans wait for the arrival of the body of former Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe to the country in Harare, September 11, 2019.

HARARE (Reuters) -- The body of Zimbabwe's founder Robert Mugabe arrived at the country's main airport on Wednesday, but his final resting place remained a source of mystery amid a dispute between some family members and the government.

Mugabe, one of the last "Big Men" of African politics who ruled the southern African nation for 37 years until he was ousted by his own army in November 2017, died in a Singapore hospital five days ago.

He is proving as polarizing in death as he was in life, as the fight over where he will be buried threatens to embarrass his successor, President Emmerson Mnangagwa, and deepen divisions in the ruling ZANU-PF party.

The former president's body arrived at Harare's Robert Gabriel Mugabe International Airport shortly after 1330 GMT, a Reuters witness said.

Crowds had gathered at the airport well before the scheduled arrival time, with some people wearing T-shirts bearing Mugabe's face and others with Mnangagwa's image, while music blared from loudspeakers.

A convoy of 4x4 vehicles with number plates bearing the letters "RG Mugabe" and the former leader's signature were also on the runway.

Mugabe's wife Grace and Zimbabwean Vice President Kembo Mohadi were among those accompanying the body of the former leader on the plane, Leo Mugabe, a nephew and family spokesman, said. Mnangagwa, top officials and other Mugabe family members were at the airport to receive the body.

Leo Mugabe declined to say where Mugabe would be buried, saying only that on arrival his body would be taken to his palatial home in the capital, known as Blue Roof.

On Thursday, ordinary Zimbabweans and supporters are expected to pay their last respects to Mugabe at a Harare soccer stadium, where the body will lie in state before being taken to his rural home in Kutama, 85 km (50 miles) from the capital, he added.

Mnangagwa and his party want Mugabe buried at a national monument to heroes of the liberation war against the white minority Rhodesian regime.

Catalans Hold Huge Rally to Call for Independence



People hold banners depicting Catalan leaders' faces as they gather ahead of a rally of Catalan separatist organizations, in Madrid, Spain March 16, 2019.

BARCELONA (Reuters) -- Catalan separatist supporters draped in pro-independence flags gathered in the regional capital Barcelona on Wednesday for a huge rally to call for a break from Spain and the release of their jailed leaders.

Massive secessionist rallies have taken place on Catalonia's commemorative day on Sept. 11 - known as the "Diada" - since 2012.

The size and tone of this year's event will act as a gauge on the strength of the separatist movement two years after it brought on Spain's biggest political crisis in decades and provoked a crackdown by the Madrid government.

It is now at a defining moment at a time when national politics themselves are in turmoil.

The "Diada" also takes place ahead of a court verdict expected next month on 12 separatist leaders - nine of whom are in jailed - for their role in a banned referendum and short-lived unilateral declaration of independence in 2017.

"We're very, very angry because nine of our politicians are in jail for letting us vote," 66-year old Monsterrat Balaguer Selga, a retired nurse who cast a vote for independence in the 2017 referendum, said in the center of Barcelona before the rally, due to start in the late afternoon.

"We want independence," said 17-year old Maria Antichillimos, a pro-independence flag draped around her

shoulders. "We will never get tired because we know what we want and will keep fighting for it."

Police officers blocked the entrance to the Catalan parliament as some protesters holding pro-independence banners approached.

Organizers said they expected hundreds of thousands to take part in the rally, while separatist leaders said another unauthorized referendum remained an option on the political front.

In 2017, Catalan leaders defied a judicial ban by carrying out the secessionist vote. The confrontation saw police wielding batons at crowds seeking to vote and prompted the then-conservative government to temporarily impose direct rule from Madrid on the region.

Prosecutors are seeking sentences ranging from 7 to 25 years, the latter only for Junqueras. They face charges of rebellion, sedition and misappropriation of public funds.

Jailed separatist leader, Jordi Cuixart, said on Twitter: "We will never give up on being free."

"We'll do it again," he said, using what has become a separatist catchphrase referring to the 2017 referendum and independence declaration.

However, there are growing divisions among separatists on what the next steps should be and some of those who came to the Diada rally expressed exasperation with pro-independence politicians.

News in Brief

KUALA LUMPUR (Dispatches) -- More than 20 Shia Muslims have been arrested by Malaysian authorities in a series of raids over the past few days, which have sparked fears of an upward trend of persecution, media reports said Wednesday. They quoted Kamil Zuhairi, a senior cleric, as saying that police in the central state of Selangor had arrested 22 Shias during a gathering to recite Quran and observe Ashura, which marks the martyrdom anniversary of Imam Hussein (AS), the third Shia Imam and the grandson of Prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon Him). Hasan Askari, another cleric, said, "They used violence on us, some of us were handcuffed. They accused us of insulting Islam." Authorities in Selangor confirmed the arrests and said the move was because Shia teachings are banned in the state. They say all of those detained have now been released but some expressed fears that they could still face action in court. On Monday, eight men were detained by religious authorities and police in the southern state of Johor during the Muharram ceremonies at a private residence. Suhakam, Malaysia's official human rights commission, has strongly denounced the latest crackdown on Shia Muslims. "Unless Malaysian authorities, NGOs and civil society respect and tolerate the religious practices of all persons, we cannot truly profess to be a diverse and multi-cultural nation," it said.

BERLIN (Reuters) -- A meeting between Germany's foreign minister and Hong Kong activist Joshua Wong sent very negative signals for bilateral relations, China's ambassador to Germany said on Wednesday, adding that the foreign ministry in Beijing had summoned the German ambassador in protest.

Ambassador Wu Ken also said China had sufficient evidence that foreign forces intervened in Hong Kong during protests and that Beijing was confident the government of Hong Kong could carry out its duties.

TOKYO (AFP) -- Women's rights protesters are taking to the streets for the sixth time in as many months as anger mounts in Japan over 'outdated' rape laws, after a man was allowed to walk free despite sexually assaulting his daughter for years. A court ruled the father had sexually abused his child from around the age 13 to 19 and even acknowledged he was violent when she resisted, but he was acquitted because the law requires prosecutors to prove there was overwhelming force, a threat, or that the victim was completely incapacitated. The verdict is being appealed, but it has sparked outrage with hundreds again expected to demonstrate in cities across the nation Wednesday, while an online petition demanding that any sex without consent be defined as rape -- signed by more than 47,000 people -- has been submitted to the justice ministry.

JUBA (Reuters) -- South Sudan's President Salva Kiir and rebel leader Riek Machar have agreed to form a transitional government by the middle of November, the information minister said on Wednesday. The two men signed a pact a year ago to end a civil war that has killed hundreds of thousands of people, displaced a third of the population and wrecked the economy. Machar made a rare visit to Juba this week to meet Kiir. "The parties discussed minor issues and the principals agreed to establish transitional government by 12th November," Michael Makuei Lueth, the information minister, told reporters. Last year's accord, which called for a unity government, has been delayed because the government says it does not have enough money to fund disarmament and the integration of all the armed factions. This week's meetings between the two leaders were aimed at ironing out outstanding issues, officials said.

ABUJA/CAPE TOWN (Reuters) -- At least 640 Nigerians have signed up to take free flights home from South Africa after xenophobic attacks on foreigners, a spokeswoman for Nigeria's president said on Tuesday. The flare-up in violence directed against mainly African foreigners has been widely condemned by South Africa's neighbors and has caused a diplomatic dispute between Nigeria and South Africa, the continent's top two economies. Private Nigerian airline Air Peace plans to operate two flights with Boeing 777 aircraft, the first leaving Lagos late on Tuesday to return on Wednesday with evacuees. The plane can carry about 300 passengers. President Muhammadu Buhari on Monday called for the immediate voluntary evacuation of all Nigerians wanting to return home, and Air Peace offered free flights last week.

JAKARTA (Reuters) -- Thousands of Indonesians prayed for rain in haze-hit towns on the islands of Sumatra and Borneo on Wednesday, as forest fires raged at the height of the dry season, the state Antara news agency reported. Fires have burnt through parts of Sumatra and Borneo island for more than a month and the government has sent 9,000 military, police and disaster agency personnel to fight the flames. Indonesia's neighbors regularly complain about smog caused by its forest fires, which are often started to clear land for palm oil and pulp plantations. But Indonesia said this week it was not to blame and fires had been spotted by satellites in several neighboring countries.