

Japan's Parliament Elects Suga as New Prime Minister



Japan's newly-elected Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga stands as he was chosen as new prime minister at the Lower House of Parliament in Tokyo, September 16, 2020.

TOKYO (AFP) -- Japan's parliament on Wednesday elected Yoshihide Suga prime minister, with the former chief cabinet secretary expected to stick closely to policies championed by Shinzo Abe during his record-breaking tenure.

Suga, 71, won an easy victory, taking 314 votes of 462 valid ballots cast in the lower house of parliament, where his ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) holds a commanding majority.

Suga, who on Monday was elected leader of the LDP, is viewed as a continuity candidate and has said his run was inspired by a desire to pursue Abe's policies.

Abe, who resigned earlier Wednesday along with his cabinet, is ending his re-

cord run in office with a year left in his mandate.

He was forced out by a recurrence of ulcerative colitis, a bowel disease that has long plagued him.

Suga has spent decades in politics -- most recently as chief cabinet secretary, where he was known for pushing government policies through a sometimes intractable bureaucracy.

He has also been the face of the government, doggedly defending its policies as spokesman, including in sometimes testy exchanges with journalists.

His upbringing, as the son of a strawberry-farmer father and schoolteacher mother, sets him apart from the many blue-blood political elites in his party and

the Japanese political scene.

But while he has championed some measures intended to help rural areas like his hometown in northern Japan's Akita, his political views remain something of a mystery.

He is viewed as more pragmatic than ideological, and during his campaign spoke more about the need to break down administrative obstacles -- so-called bureaucratic silos -- than any grand guiding principles.

He will face a raft of tough challenges, including an economy that was already in recession before the coronavirus pandemic.

Suga has said kickstarting the economy will be a top priority, along with containing the virus -- essential if the postponed Tokyo 2020 Olympics are to open as planned in July 2021.

His recipe for doing that? More of the same, he says.

"In order to overcome the crisis and give the Japanese people a sense of relief, we need to succeed in what Prime Minister Abe has been implementing," Suga said after being elected LDP leader on Monday.

Suga's cabinet is expected to bring few surprises, with Foreign Minister Toshimitsu Motegi and Finance Minister Taro Aso expected to stay on in their jobs.

Defense Minister Taro Kono is tipped to be replaced by Abe's brother Nobuo Kishi, who was adopted by his uncle as a child and carries his surname.

Kono is reportedly set to become minister in charge of administrative reform, a portfolio Suga considers particularly important.

Coronavirus Spreads Fast in India: Cases Pass 5 Million



People wait to board passenger buses during rush hour at a bus terminal, amidst the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak, in Mumbai, India, September 9, 2020.

NEW DELHI (AFP) -- India's total coronavirus cases passed five million on Wednesday, health ministry data showed, as the pandemic extends its grip on the vast country at an ever-faster rate.

With its latest one million cases recorded in just 11 days, a world record, India now has 5.02 million infections. Only the United States has more, with 6.59 million.

India has for some time been recording the world's biggest daily jumps in cases, and on Wednesday, the rise was just over 90,000 with a record 1,290 deaths.

While India took 167 days to

reach one million cases, the next million came in just 21 days, faster than the U.S. and Brazil, according to the Times of India.

Just 29 days later, India became only the third country after the U.S. and Brazil to post four million infections. India passed Brazil earlier this month.

Even so, and with India now testing around a million people daily, many experts say that this is not enough and that the true number of infections may be far higher.

This has been borne out in several studies in recent weeks measuring antibodies against the virus among the cramped populations of megacities

Fish Exposed to Noise Pollution Die Early: Study

LONDON (AFP) -- Fish stressed by noise are less able to fight off disease while prolonged exposure can lead to an early death, according to research published Tuesday, the latest outlining the consequences of man-made clamor on the natural world.

Human noise pervades the environment, from the roar of vehicle engines to the clatter of industry.

Being underwater is no escape, with the whirl of ship propellers thought to interfere with whale sonar.

Researchers at the University of Cardiff in Britain said noise pollution has been shown to lead to "stress, hearing loss, behavioral changes and impacted immunity".

But they said the ways in which noise affects resistance to disease had remained "neglected".

In their paper, published in the journal Royal Society Open Science, researchers tested the impact of random blasts of white noise played into fish tanks on the susceptibility of guppy fish to parasitic infection.

One group of fish was exposed to "acute" noise played for 24 hours, another group had the noise played for seven days.

All fish were anaesthetized and infected with a parasite, either after the noise exposure in the case of the acute group, or during it for the chronic group.

A third control group of fish were infected but left in a silent tank.

The authors found that while the fish exposed to acute noise had the highest disease burden over a 17-day monitoring period, those in the chronic group were more likely to die earlier -- at day 12, compared to day 14 for both other groups of fish.

"By revealing the detrimental impacts of acute and chronic noise on host-parasite interactions, we add to the growing body of evidence demonstrating a link between noise pollution and reduced animal health," the authors said.

They added that this could have implications for fish farms, where the species being reared are highly susceptible to parasites.

There is an increasing understanding of the health burden associated with the cacophony created by human industry and transportation.

In a meta-analysis of individual studies published in November, scientists at Queen's University Belfast found that noise affects amphibians, arthropods, birds, fish, mammals, molluscs and reptilians.

So widespread is the problem, they called for man-made noise to be treated as a "major global pollutant".

Trump: COVID Vaccine Could Be Ready in a Month



U.S. President Donald Trump rallies with supporters at a campaign event in Henderson, Nevada, U.S. September 13, 2020.

PHILADELPHIA (AFP) -- U.S. President Donald Trump said Tuesday that a coronavirus vaccine may be available within a month -- an acceleration of even his own optimistic predictions -- but added that the pandemic could go away by itself.

"We're very close to having a vaccine," he told a town hall question-and-answer session with voters in Pennsylvania aired on ABC News. "We're within weeks of getting it you know -- could be three weeks, four weeks," he said.

Only hours earlier, speaking to Fox News, Trump had said a vaccine could come in "four weeks, it could be eight weeks."

Democrats have expressed concern that Trump is putting political pressure on government health regulators and scientists to approve a rushed vaccine in time to help turn around his uphill bid for reelection against challenger Joe Biden on November 3.

Experts including top U.S. government infectious diseases doctor Anthony Fauci say vaccine approval is more likely toward the end of the year.

At the ABC town hall Trump was asked why he'd downplayed the gravity of the Covid-19 pandemic, which has now killed close to 200,000 people in the U.S.

Trump replied by saying: "I didn't downplay it. I actually, in many ways,

I up-played it in terms of action." But Trump himself told journalist Bob Woodward during taped interviews for the new book "Rage" -- published Tuesday -- that he had deliberately decided to "play it down" to avoid alarming Americans.

Returning to one of his most controversial views on the virus, that has ravaged the economy and which government scientists say will remain a danger for some time, Trump insisted "it is going to disappear."

"It would go away without the vaccine but it's going to go away a lot faster with it," he said.

Challenged about how the virus would go away by itself, he said "you'll develop like a herd mentality," apparently meaning the concept of herd immunity, when enough people have developed resistance to the disease to effectively stop transmission.

"It's going to be herd developed and that's going to happen. That will all happen but with a vaccine, I think it will go away very quickly. But I really believe we're rounding the corner," he said.

The president, who is rarely seen wearing a mask in public and long refused to push Americans to adopt the habit, said "a lot of people don't want to wear masks and people don't think masks are good."

Asked what people he meant, Trump answered: "Waiters."

EU: Chances of Brexit Deal With UK Fading Away



European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen walks during her first State of the Union address at a plenary session of European Parliament in Brussels, Belgium September 16, 2020.

BRUSSELS (Reuters) -- Every passing day reduces chances for sealing a new trade deal with Britain, the European Union's chief executive said on Wednesday, warning London that there was "very little time" left to put an agreement in place by the end of the year.

In her major annual policy speech, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen dedicated just a few sentences to Brexit, mostly focusing on the economic recovery from the coronavirus pandemic as well as digital and climate investments.

"With every day that passes, the chances of a timely agreement do start to fade," von der Leyen told the European Parliament in a "state of the (European) Union" speech styled on the ones U.S. presidents deliver.

Von der Leyen also stressed both the EU and Britain negotiated and ratified their Brexit divorce deal and warned London the agreement "cannot be unilaterally

changed, disregarded or dis-applied".

"This is a matter of law, trust and good faith... Trust is the foundation of any strong partnership," she said.

Von der Leyen said the bloc would "never backtrack" on UK's divorce deal, which took three years to negotiate, as it was protecting the delicate peace on the island of Ireland from the consequences of Brexit.

Brexit talks are now in crisis yet again as Prime Minister Boris Johnson put forward a new Internal Market Bill to the UK parliament that would undercut Britain's EU divorce treaty.

That increased the risk of the most damaging, no-deal economic split precipitating at the end of the year when Britain's standstill post-Brexit transition ends.

Reuters reported exclusively on Tuesday, however, that Britain had quietly offered concessions on fisheries in trade talks with the European Union last week, leaving the bloc thinking London might still be open to clinching an agreement.

News in Brief

ROME (AFP) -- Explosions and a huge fire ripped through the port area of the Italian city of Ancona early Wednesday, destroying warehouses and lorries, but there were no casualties, firefighters said. The flames created vast mushroom clouds of smoke in the city on Italy's Adriatic coast. The explosions sparked the fire shortly after midnight. The blaze was under control Wednesday morning after the intervention of 16 firefighting teams, the fire service said on Twitter. It was not yet clear what caused the explosions. Warehouses in the area were likely to have stored flammable liquid, according to Rai news, which said there was a company nearby that produced liquid nitrogen, as well as a power station and methane plant. As the smell of burning filled Ancona, the capital of the Marche region, the council said it had "temporarily ordered closed all schools, the university, the parks, open-air sports facilities".

WASHINGTON (AFP) -- President Donald Trump, in his latest shredding of political niceties, suggested Tuesday that his Democratic opponent Joe Biden has taken drugs to improve his performance in debates. The Republican, who is well behind in national polls, initially insinuated during a Fox News interview that "something was strange" with what he saw as Biden's improvement during the Democratic primary season debates. Early on, when there were multiple Democratic candidates lined up on stage, Biden was "a disaster" and "grossly incompetent," Trump said. But at a later debate where Biden was one-on-one with leftist rival Bernie Sanders, "he was OK," Trump told Fox he didn't want to say what he thought was the reason for the improvement. Seconds later, he did. "He's taking something (that) you know, gives him some clarity, or whatever," he said. Trump repeated his demand that Biden should undergo a drug test before their first of three presidential debates scheduled for September 29. "I would take one too," he said. Biden responded by telling a Florida radio station "I'm looking forward to the debate and he's a fool. The comments are just foolish."

MOSCOW (Reuters) -- Russia's sovereign wealth fund has agreed a deal to sell 100 million doses of its COVID-19 vaccine, Sputnik-V, to a major listed pharmaceutical company in India, a source close to the deal said on Wednesday. Clinical trials of the Russian vaccine in India are expected to follow and to be held jointly with this firm, the source said. Both the trials and supply deal depend on domestic regulatory approval. The Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF) has already inked vaccine supply deals with Kazakhstan, Brazil and Mexico and has reached a manufacturing partnership agreement with India to produce 300 million doses of the Sputnik-V vaccine there. RDIF later said it will supply India's Dr. Reddy's Laboratories with 100 million doses of the Sputnik-V vaccine against COVID-19 once it receives regulatory approval in India. Russia has billed Sputnik-V as the first vaccine against coronavirus to be registered in the world. Large-scale trials, known as Phase III, involving at least 40,000 people, were launched in Russia on Aug. 26 but have yet to be completed.

TOKYO (Reuters) -- Japanese conglomerate Hitachi Ltd said on Wednesday it would exit a stalled British nuclear power project, a decision that deals a blow to Britain's plans to replace ageing plants. Hitachi last year froze the 3 trillion yen (\$28 billion) project on the island of Anglesey, in north Wales, and booked a writedown of 300 billion yen on its British nuclear unit as the project failed to find private investors. Sources at the time said Hitachi had called on the British government to boost financial support for the project. The project was expected to provide around 6% of Britain's electricity.

MOSCOW, Sept 16 (Reuters) - Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu arrived in Belarus on Wednesday for talks on military cooperation, the Belarusian Defense Ministry said. The talks follow a meeting between Russian President Vladimir Putin and Belarusian leader Alexander Lukashenko in the Black Sea resort of Sochi earlier this week. Lukashenko faces mass protests at home following a presidential election last month that demonstrators claim was rigged.

BRUSSELS (AFP) -- The European Commission's president on Wednesday warned Turkey against trying to intimidate Greece and Cyprus, as tensions grow over energy reserves in the eastern Mediterranean. In her annual State of the EU speech, Ursula von der Leyen said Ankara was a key partner doing important work hosting refugees but stressed "none of this is justification for attempts to intimidate its neighbors". Turkey, Greece and Cyprus have been locked in a row over energy resources and maritime borders in the region, with Ankara infuriating the EU countries by sending research ships with naval escorts to work in contested waters. There have been fears of conflict erupting and Cyprus is pressing the rest of the EU to impose fresh sanctions on Ankara over the drilling.

ATHENS (AFP) -- Thirteen people have been detained on the Greek island of Samos after a fire threatened the local migrant camp, police said Wednesday, days after another blaze destroyed Europe's largest migrant camp on Lesbos. "We are examining the possible participation of these suspects in the incident," a Samos police source told AFP. The officer declined to identify the nationalities of the suspects. The fire broke out in a forested area near the Samos camp late on Tuesday, but firefighters were able to place it under control. The Lesbos fire at Moria camp on September 8 left over 12,000 asylum seekers homeless. Police have arrested six migrants in connection with the incident.