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Scandal comes as Kishida battles sinking ratings

Funding probe zeroes in on Abe faction

GABRIELE NINIVAGGI
STAFF WRITER

A political funding scandal involving the Liberal Democratic Party's factions deepened Friday as reports emerged that the largest faction is being probed for the alleged mismanagement of over ¥100 million in fundraising money.

The Tokyo Public Prosecutor's Office is investigating the faction once led by former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe as part of a growing scandal involving the alleged underreporting of funds by groups within the ruling party.

The scandal threatens to make an already trying year for Prime Minister Fumio Kishida even worse.

According to several media reports, for a period of five years the group — which boasts a membership of 99 lawmakers — systematically paid out income exceeding a quota to individual lawmakers without adequately reporting it. The total sum, collected through tickets to fundraising parties, allegedly exceeds ¥100 million, far more than had previously been reported.

Ryu Shionoya, chair of the leadership committee of what's still known as the Abe faction, admitted that the group had set a quota on the number of tickets allowed for sale to each member lawmaker, according to their rank or seniority.

He then added that the group had discussed potential payments to individual lawmakers for income exceeding the established quota, but denied any accusation of underreporting. Hours later, he withdrew his previous remarks, saying that he would look into the matter after verifying the authenticity of the reports.

If adequately reported, rebates of extra income to individual lawmakers does not constitute a violation of the law. But any

failure to record the transaction by the faction or lawmakers could become a legal matter. The Abe faction collected over ¥660 million through fundraising parties hosted from 2018 to 2022.

The investigation in the upcoming weeks threatens to further hurt Kishida at a time when public scrutiny over financial scandals in the political world is increasing.

While Kishida is not a member of the faction, five members of its steering committee occupy prominent party and Cabinet positions — LDP policy chief Koichi Hagiuda, LDP parliamentary affairs chief Tsuyoshi Takagi and LDP Upper House Secretary-General Hiroshige Seko, along with Chief Cabinet Secretary Hirokazu Matsuno and economy minister Yasutoshi Nishimura.

Agriculture minister Ichiro Miyashita and internal affairs minister Junji Suzuki also hail from the faction. On Friday, Suzuki denied receiving any kickbacks, but both he and Miyashita admitted they were aware of the existence of a quota for the number of tickets sold by lawmakers for each party.

Whether Cabinet members and LDP executives received any kickbacks and appropriately reported any such transactions will be a matter of further investigation.

Matsuno, a former secretary-general of the Abe faction, refused to offer an official government position on the matter.

"I would like to refrain from answering questions regarding single political groups or my own political activities," he told a news conference Friday morning, evading further questions on his own involvement in the matter.

Kishida, who is in Dubai for COP28, said he would comment on the matter after examining the situation.

The Political Funds Control Act, which has been amended several times to curb embezzlement and increase transparency

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U.S. military officers head out to search for missing crew members from an Osprey crash on Friday. Jiji

U.S. Osprey crash renews concerns

Japan seeks better communication amid public's 'great anxiety'

Explainer

GABRIEL DOMINGUEZ
STAFF WRITER

The crash earlier this week of a U.S. Air Force CV-22B Osprey — the first fatal accident involving the tilt-rotor aircraft in Japan — has rekindled safety concerns, prompting Tokyo to ground its own Osprey fleet and ask the U.S. to do the same.

Citing anxiety among the public, Defense Minister Minoru Kihara had asked the commander of U.S. Forces Japan to suspend all non-emergency Osprey flights over its territory until the safety of the aircraft type could be confirmed. Despite the request, the Pentagon seems to have only halted opera-

tions of the Osprey variant involved in the crash, while other models continued to fly in Japan as of Friday, Kyodo reported, citing the Defense Ministry.

The lack of clarity regarding the Osprey grounding has prompted concerns in Tokyo, with Chief Cabinet Secretary Hirokazu Matsuno saying that flights were being carried out "without sufficient explanation of flight safety confirmation." He also called the incident "deeply regrettable" as it caused "great anxiety to people" in the region where it happened.

Pentagon press secretary Sabrina Singh said Thursday the U.S. military was investigating the cause of the crash while emphasizing that the Defense Department's immediate focus was on finding the missing crew members as search-and-rescue operations, also involving the Japan Coast Guard and Self-Defense Forces personnel, continued round the clock.

The Osprey crashed Wednesday into waters off Yakushima island in Kagoshima Prefecture. At least one crew member has been confirmed dead while the other seven remain missing. More than 50 U.S. military personnel have been killed in Osprey incidents around the world over the past three decades, but this is the first such fatal crash in Japan.

That said, other incidents involving Ospreys in Japan have created fears among the public. In 2016, just four years after the type began operations in the country, a Marine Corps MV-22 went down off Nago, Okinawa Prefecture. This year alone, Ospreys have made several emergency landings at Japanese civilian airports.

Washington has repeatedly vowed to implement preventive measures and even grounded an undisclosed number of Ospreys earlier this year to replace aging components.

The unique aircraft has had its share of incidents, but still has a relatively safe record compared to other military aircraft.

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Israel resumes Gaza combat as truce with Hamas ends

GAZA STRIP
REUTERS

Israel resumed combat operations against Hamas in the Gaza Strip on Friday after accusing the Palestinian militant group of firing rockets at Israel and reneging on a deal to free all women held as hostages, violating their temporary truce agreement.

The seven-day pause, which began on Nov. 24 and was extended twice, had allowed for the exchange of dozens of hostages held in Gaza for hundreds of Palestinian prisoners and facilitated the entry of humanitarian aid into the shattered coastal strip.

In the hour before the truce was set to end at 7 a.m., Israel said it intercepted a rocket fired from Gaza.

There was no immediate comment from Hamas or claim of responsibility for the launch.

"With the resumption of fighting we emphasize: The Israeli government is committed to achieving the goals of the war — to free our hostages, to eliminate Hamas and to ensure that Gaza will never pose a threat to the residents of Israel," the office of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said in a statement.

"What Israel did not achieve during the 50 days before the truce, it will not achieve by continuing its aggression after the truce," Ezzat El Rashq, a member of the Hamas political bureau, said on the group's web site.

Palestinian media and Gaza's interior ministry reported Israeli air and artillery strikes across the enclave after the truce expired, including in Rafah, near the border with Egypt.

In Khan Younis, in the southern Gaza Strip, a witness said he could hear heavy shelling and see smoke rising in the east of the town. People were fleeing the area to camps in the west of Khan Younis for cover, he added.

Al-Jazeera reported a number of people had been killed and injured by Israeli raids and shelling.

The Israeli military confirmed its jets were striking Hamas targets in Gaza.

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Hope for reform
The entertainment story of the year is one that's long overdue | **CULTURE, PAGE 11**

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Questionable move
Kishida's ousting of his human rights adviser shows a shift in priorities | **OPINION, PAGE 9**

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2023 buzzword of the year is all about winning

YUKANA INOUE
STAFF WRITER

The Japan Series was not the only thing the Hanshin Tigers won this year, with "A.R.E." — based on the Japanese word "are," meaning "that" — crowned buzzword of the year, after team manager Akinobu Okada popularized the term as an indirect reference to victory.

"Are" began being used to avoid saying "win" out loud in an effort to not jinx the team's chances of winning the league championship. It later morphed into A.R.E., an acronym that became the team's slogan for the year, standing for Aim, Respect and Empower. It appeared to work its magic, with the team, the subject of a supposed KFC-related curse, winning its first Japan Series in 38 years.

"Baseball is a team sport so you can't do it alone — by continuing to win games thanks to everyone's effort, in Kansai, newspapers and media would introduce the term 'are' every single day, leading to a way bigger response than I ever imagined," Okada said. "It really hyped up Kansai and the sports



industry as a whole — I'm glad to have been able to contribute even a little to that."

The annual buzzword contest, called U-Can Shingo Ryukogo Taisho, is organized by the publishing house Jiyukokuminsha. This year continues a streak of baseball-related terms being named the top buzzword, with "Murakami-sama" winning in

Tigers manager Akinobu Okada waves during a victory parade for winning the Japan Series, in Osaka on Nov. 23. POOL / VIA KYODO

2022 to recognize record-breaking Yakult Swallows slugger Munetaka Murakami, and "Shōtaimu" ("Sho-Time") and "riaru nitōryu" ("real two-way player") topping the list in 2021 in reference to MLB phenom Shohei Ohtani.

One more baseball-inspired term — "peppā-miru pafōmansu" ("pepper-mill performance") — made the top 10 this year, recognizing Lars Nootbaar's celebrations as part of the Samurai Japan squad at the World Baseball Classic. The St. Louis Cardinals outfielder became a fan favorite, including for the gesture meant to praise his teammates for "grinding it out" during the tournament, which Japan would go on to win.

Another sports-related term that made the top 10 was "yonenburi / koedashiōen" ("first time in four years / cheering out loud"), a nod to how audiences were given the all clear to scream and cheer at sporting events and concerts thanks to COVID-19 restrictions being lifted.

"Up until last year, choosing the buzzword of the year was depressing because (many of the options) were all kind of dark," said

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COOL JAPAN

Photo Contest

for Foreigners 2023

Japan. Cool Japan.

Theme:

'The unique appeal of Japan'

Submission deadline:

Dec. 15

Current or past international residents may participate.

Secretariat of Intellectual Property Strategy

Headquarters

The Cabinet Office, Government of Japan

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