

Preliminary probe suggests fault led to fatal crash

U.S. military grounds entire Osprey fleet

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The U.S. military has grounded all of its Osprey V-22 tilt-rotor aircraft a week after eight service members died when an Air Force CV-22 crashed off Kagoshima Prefecture's Yakushima island in the first fatal accident for the type in Japan.

The U.S. Air Force, Navy and Marine Corps announced that they were grounding hundreds of aircraft after a preliminary investigation into the Nov. 29 crash indicated that problems with the aircraft — not a mistake by the crew — had led to the deaths.

"Preliminary investigation information indicates a potential materiel failure caused the mishap, but the underlying cause of the failure is unknown at this time," Lt. Gen. Tony Bauernfeind, head of U.S. Air Force Special Operations Command, said in a statement late Wednesday.

Grounding the Ospreys "will provide time and space for a thorough investigation to determine causal factors and recommen-

dations to ensure the Air Force CV-22 fleet returns to flight operations," Bauernfeind added.

In a separate notice, the U.S. Naval Air Systems Command, which is responsible for the Marine Corps and Navy variants of the aircraft, said it was grounding all Ospreys.

"While the mishap remains under investigation, we are implementing additional risk mitigation controls to ensure the safety of our service members," it said.

Sources involved in the alliance have said that the U.S. military does not ground a fleet unless there is a clear indication of mechanical error, since the cascading effects of doing so on maintenance, operations and resources are highly significant.

The crash — the deadliest since the Osprey entered service in 2007 — has rekindled concern in Japan over the aircraft's safety, with the country's defense chief saying Tuesday that these had yet to be allayed despite an earlier halt in operations of the crashed Osprey's unit.

Japan has grounded the Self-Defense



U.S. military Ospreys are lined up on a runway at the U.S. Marine Corps Air Station Futenma in Ginowan, Okinawa Prefecture, on Dec. 1 KYODO

Forces' own fleet of 14 Ospreys and initially asked the United States not to conduct flights of the aircraft except for ongoing search operations. But the Defense Ministry later said that U.S. military flights involving Osprey variants other than the CV-22 type that crashed were continuing after undergoing safety checks.

On Thursday, Chief Cabinet Secretary Hirokazu Matsuno, the Japanese government's top spokesman, said Tokyo was confirming the details of the grounding with the U.S. side.



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Prosecutors seek death penalty over KyoAni arson

KYOTO
KYODO, JIJI

Prosecutors on Thursday demanded capital punishment for a man who has admitted to the 2019 arson attack at Kyoto Animation that killed 36 people, while his defense counsel has called for an acquittal, arguing he was not mentally competent at the time.

In seeking capital punishment for Shinji Aoba, 45, in the lay judge trial at the Kyoto District Court, a prosecutor said his conduct was "premeditated, extremely dangerous and truly cruel, having a significant impact on society."

The prosecution acknowledged that Aoba harbored delusions, wrongly believing a novel he entered in a contest held by Kyoto Animation had been plagiarized by the firm, but said his delusions had limited impact on his behavior and did not constitute a reason to avoid the maximum sentence.

The focus of the trial over one of Japan's worst-ever mass murder cases is whether Aoba is legally competent. The ruling is expected to be handed down on Jan. 25.

Aoba's defense team argued that he should be acquitted or given a reduced sentence due to diminished capacity caused by his delusions.

However, the prosecutor said that "The victims bore no fault and the horror and despair of being exposed to a hellish situation is indescribable ... the degree of disregard for life is profound."

The prosecutor also called the defendant's motive "completely irrational" and "utterly selfish," saying he had shifted the blame for his unsuccessful life onto Kyoto Animation.

Aoba entered Kyoto Animation's Studio 1 on July 18, 2019, at around 10:30 a.m. and used gasoline to start a fire, killing 36 and seriously injuring 32 of the 70 employees and others in the building, according to the indictment.

During the trial on Wednesday, he apologized to the victims' families for the first time, saying, "I am sorry."

Aoba also said he has to "take the incident seriously." But at the same time, he confessed, "To be honest, I can't deny that I often turn a blind eye to the magnitude of what I did."

Responding to the bereaved families' request for capital punishment in the trial, he said, "I think I should pay for my crime with that."

The LDP political funding scandal and its implications

Explainer
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Prime Minister Fumio Kishida and his ruling Liberal Democratic Party are in hot water over suspicions that party factions underreported funds for years, including kickbacks and off-the-book revenue from ticket sales for fundraising parties.

With Tokyo prosecutors already investigating the situation, there is a growing belief that if one of Kishida's Cabinet members or

party executives are forced to quit, it could be the final nail in the coffin for the prime minister.

But what exactly happened, and what is at issue?

Fundraising party tickets

Lawmakers, factions and political parties host fundraising events as a way to increase revenue, through ticket sales. A ticket will usually cost around ¥20,000. Profits — after excluding the costs for the venue, meal and drinks — go to the organizer.

For factions, large-scale parties are their

main source of revenue. They often attract several thousand participants, resulting in hundreds of millions of yen in ticket sales. Businesses might purchase dozens of tickets to become better acquainted with the lawmaker, faction or political party hosting the event.

In 2022, the Kishida faction received ¥229.35 million in revenue, of which 80% was from fundraising parties. Similarly, the faction led by former Finance Minister Taro Aso garnered ¥286.58 million in revenue, with 81% of it coming from fundraising parties.

Under the political funds law, political groups need to report revenue from such

events if any individual person or firm purchases more than ¥200,000 worth of tickets in a year. As long as the flow of money is reported adequately as stated in the law, there is nothing wrong with holding a fundraising party.

Kickbacks

The underreporting allegations surfaced in late November, when it was reported that five major LDP factions made a total of ¥40 million from ticket sales that were not reported under law in the four years through 2021.

The five factions were: the Kishida faction, the faction of former Secretary-General

Toshihiro Nikai, the Aso faction, the faction of LDP Secretary-General Toshimitsu Motegi, and the faction that was led by the late Prime Minister Shinzo Abe.

Claiming there had been a mistake, each faction revised their political funds report. At the time, the damage appeared limited.

The situation changed on Dec. 1, when the Asahi Shimbun reported that the Abe faction, the largest in the LDP, had made off-the-book income in ticket sales worth about ¥100 million over a period of five years. Faction members who sold more tickets than

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The push to end China's 'internal passport system'

YEW LUN TIAN, KEVIN YAO
AND FARAH MASTER
BEIJING/HONG KONG
REUTERS

Yang Guang's rise from a village farmer to an Audi-driving businessman with two properties hinged largely on one of the most coveted documents in China: an urban hukou, or residency permit.

The 45-year-old who lives in the central city of Zhengzhou likens the permit — which typically ties a person's access to health, education, loans and other services to their birthplace — to a "cattle ear-tag the state clipped us with."

"It uses this tag to sort us into different categories of people entitled to different sets of privileges and subjected to different obligations," he said.

When Zhengzhou in the early 2000s temporarily allowed those who bought an apartment to also qualify for a city hukou, Yang seized the opportunity, allowing him to register a business and open stores across Henan province's capital and transform his fortunes.

In recent months, Chinese authorities



have fanned hopes among some economists that the internal passport system that has largely tethered people's destinies to their place of origin since the 1950s may be in its dying days. A distressed property market and sluggish consumption have injected new urgency into a drive to loosen restrictions and grant more people the opportunities that urban registration affords.

The Ministry of Public Security in August

Visitors take pictures in front of a giant statue of late Chinese Chairman Mao Zedong in Yanan, Shaanxi province, China, in 2021. REUTERS

called on cities with up to 3 million people to abolish hukou, and those with 3 million to 5 million to significantly relax issuance. Zhejiang and Jiangsu provinces have announced plans for an almost complete opening to new residents.

But two people involved in hukou policy discussions within the central government said that progress is stalling, making further significant breakthroughs unlikely, especially in China's larger cities.

The accounts described previously unreported tensions over hukou reform, with Chinese officials acknowledging a strong economic rationale for change but hesitant to take decisive moves that might disrupt social stability and burden indebted cities with added costs.

"Hukou reform is a hard bone to chew," said Jia Kang, founding president of the China Academy of New Supply-Side Economics, who advises the government on policies including hukou. "It should be a natural process, it's not something you can do simply because you want to."

"Currently, all reforms are difficult."

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