

Policy speech comes amid low approval ratings

In key address, PM puts focus on ‘power’

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At a time of languishing approval ratings and soul-searching for the ruling Liberal Democratic Party, Prime Minister Fumio Kishida made “power” the key leitmotif of his policy speech in parliament on Tuesday.

He emphasized the “power of bonds” on full display in the country’s response to the earthquake that devastated the Noto Peninsula on New Year’s Day and how it became a “new power” for the future, as well as the foundation of Japan’s rural revitalization.

For the man who, over two years ago, reached the party’s (and the country’s) leadership trumpeting his “listening” power, it’s a rhetorical homecoming.

However, this time the prime minister might need more than a standard dose of power to overcome what is set to be a very uncertain phase of his premiership.

Kishida used his initial remarks to address the consequences of the Noto earthquake.

He listed the several complications faced in the direct aftermath of the disaster — road disruptions, infrastructural damage, the challenges of a graying community — and thanked those working on the recovery efforts.

Alluding to the region’s proverbial “kindness,” he expressed his administration’s commitment to supporting the livelihood of the evacuees, without hesitation due to budgetary constraints.

Recalling his visit to the region in mid-January, he then referred to some of the technological endeavors he saw taking place, including innovative logistics solutions such as the use of drones in rescue operations.

“What all these endeavors have in common is that Japan’s traditional ‘power of bonds’ has been strengthened by a combination of new elements such as digital technology,” Kishida said.

Toward the conclusion of his speech, Kishida anecdotally told the assembly about

the story of a lacquerware artist from the city of Wajima, in the Noto region, who, on the occasion of the Kumamoto earthquake in 2016, repaired ceramic artifacts badly damaged by the disaster.

Now Kumamoto is repaying that favor, he said.

The political-funds scandal that disrupted Japan’s political landscape late last year soon became a pressing issue for the administration.

“There’s no policy implementation without political stability. And there is no political stability without the trust of citizens,” Kishida told the plenary assembly early on in his speech.

Amid incessant heckling from the opposition benches, Kishida apologized, acknowledging his responsibility as LDP president, and emphasized his resolve to implement a full overhaul of norms to increase transparency in political funding.

Looking back on the LDP interim report issued last week, he confirmed the party’s resolution to move away from old-school faction-based politics and work with opposition parties toward a revision of the Political Funds Control Act.

“There is no end to political reform, and we will continue our efforts for further reform within the party panel,” Kishida said.

The economy will remain the administration’s most important mission, Kishida said, with a priority on delivering pay hikes. Since becoming prime minister over two years ago, Kishida has made the issue the center of his economic policy.

“We will do everything in our power to make income higher than the cost of living this year — we must make it a reality,” Kishida told the assembly. “We will instill a forward-looking attitude across society that ‘pay hikes are a matter of course.’”

After touching on the administration’s efforts to advance pay hikes in sectors such as health care, construction and logistics,

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Toyota Motor Chairman Akio Toyoda gives a news conference in Nagoya on Tuesday. BLOOMBERG

Toyota sees mixed start to 2024

Chairman apologizes as scandals stack up for carmaker

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For Toyota, it has been a mixed start to 2024: The carmaker defended its position as the world’s top vehicle-seller for the fourth straight year in 2023, but it is also mired in a series of misconduct scandals involving its group firms, which threaten to tarnish its brand.

Thanks to the reduced impact of chip shortages, on Tuesday it was reported that unit sales by Toyota and its subsidiaries climbed 7.2% from the previous year to a record 11.23 million. Production by Toyota and its group firms also reached a record high of 11.52 million units last year, up 8.6%.



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H.K. leaders start push to tighten security laws

JESSIE PANG AND GREG TORODE
HONG KONG
REUTERS

Hong Kong’s leader confirmed on Tuesday his intention to pass tighter national security laws soon to build on sweeping legislation Beijing imposed on the city in 2020, saying the city “could not afford to wait.”

Some business people, diplomats and academics are watching developments closely, saying the prospect of new laws targeting espionage, state secrets and foreign influence, known as Article 23, could have a deep impact on the global financial hub.

Chief Executive John Lee said the government will attempt to pass the laws “as soon as possible” but did not give a precise timetable for them to be approved by the city’s legislature.

“Why now? We can’t wait. I’ve said it very clearly. We can’t afford to wait. It’s for 26 years we’ve been waiting. We shouldn’t wait any longer,” Lee said, describing it as the city’s constitutional responsibility dating back to its 1997 handover to China from British colonial rule.

“While we, society as a whole, looks calm and looks very safe, we still have to watch out for potential sabotage, undercurrents that try to create troubles,” he said, saying some foreign agents could still be active in Hong Kong.

Lee said freedoms would be safeguarded and the laws would meet international standards.

A 110-page consultation document would be submitted to the Legislative Council on Tuesday afternoon, and the consultation would end on February 28.

The document outlines the need for new and updated laws covering the theft of state secrets, espionage, treason, sedition and sabotage, including the use of computers and electronic systems to conduct actions endangering national security. Tighter control of foreign political organisations linked to the city is also advocated.

The consultation document warns that Hong Kong is under increasing threat from foreign espionage and intelligence operations, and cites the months of pro-democracy protests that rocked the city in 2019.

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Waiting on Beijing

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Tokyo plans new underground missile shelter

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The Tokyo Metropolitan Government has revealed that it is planning to build an underground missile shelter under the Azabu-Juban subway station in Tokyo’s Minato Ward, in a move that comes amid heightened geopolitical tensions and concerns over national security.

“We have prepared other evacuation facilities in the past, but considering how rocky international affairs are right now we think it’s important to prepare for the serious and significant threat of ballistic missiles,” Tokyo Gov. Yuriko Koike said Friday.

Azabu-Juban station is a stop along the Toei Oedo and Namboku lines, and is in close proximity to the Roppongi and Hiroo districts where many foreign embassies and office buildings are located.

The underground missile shelter will be made by converting an emergency supplies warehouse within Azabu-Juban station.

Under the Civil Protection Law, the national government requires all prefectures to assign temporary emergency evacuation



spots where residents can seek shelter from a missile attack. Typical locations include the basement area of concrete buildings and underground train stations. Shelters must have enough space to afford 0.825 square meters — about 90 square centimeters — per person for the entire population of the prefecture.

As of October, Tokyo had 4,258 locations designated as temporary emergency evacu-

A drill simulating a ballistic missile launch is held at the Higashinakano Station on the Toei Oedo Line on Jan. 15.
KYODO

ation areas. The metropolitan government is also looking to build stronger, more durable facilities that would be able to withstand prolonged, intense strikes.

While these temporary emergency shelters are located in areas deemed to be safe, they do not hold supplies needed for longer stays, such as drinking water and food.

Officials at the metropolitan government have toured bomb shelters in other countries such as Finland in order to gather ideas to increase the safety of their own temporary shelters.

“We would like to move forward (with our plan) using these examples as a reference,” Koike said.

To prepare for long-term evacuations, the shelter in Azabu-Juban is set to be equipped with an emergency power source among other tools, in addition to having a stockpile of drinking water and food.

Around ¥165 million will be set aside by the metropolitan government in next year’s budget for expenses related to the project, such as research fees.

The exact date for the project’s completion remains unclear.



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