

Move set for April comes amid taxi driver crunch

Ride-hailing ban to be partially lifted

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Amid a taxi driver shortage, Japan is set to partially lift its ban on ride-hailing services starting next April.

Under the government plan announced Wednesday, nonprofessional drivers will be allowed to operate in specific areas at certain times under the guidance of taxi companies when there is a noticeable lack of rides available.

The plan was discussed at a Digital Administrative and Fiscal Reform Council meeting Wednesday and was proposed as a way of combating the nationwide shortage of taxi drivers amid growing demand for transportation services.

“Based on the severe challenges in regional transportation that we face all over the country, we have decided to begin ride-hailing services using personal vehicles and personal drivers from April next year,” Prime Minister Fumio Kishida said at the meeting Wednesday.

The government plans to collect data from currently operating taxi-hailing apps to determine which areas and times are experiencing the most severe ride shortages and then decide when and where nonprofessionals can act as taxi drivers. The partial lifting of the ban is intended to be implemented in not only rural areas but also city centers.

In order to ensure the safety of passengers and to regulate payments, the plan proposes that existing taxi companies manage the ride-hailing services for now. Allowing other businesses to join the service as middlemen at a later date is also being considered.

The government is set to begin discussions on fully lifting the ban on ride-hailing starting next year, with the goal of reaching a decision by June.

Currently, ride-hailing apps such as Go and Uber only allow users in Japan to call taxis, unlike in countries such as the U.S.

where anyone with a driver's license, after going through a screening process, can use their personal vehicle to drive passengers to their selected destination for a fee.

According to the Japan Federation of Hire-Taxi Association, the COVID-19 pandemic and the country's graying population has led to a significant decline in taxi drivers — as much as by 20% during the four years between 2019 and 2023.

Lifting the ban has been discussed over the past year as demand for transportation services has grown, partly due to the resurgence of inbound tourism.

“We conducted discussions with the understanding that the shortage of rides is not just an issue in rural areas with a lack of regional transportation, but also in tourist spots and cities,” said transport minister Tetsuo Saito. “We would like to create a system that would be easy to use for inbound tourists as well.”

However, opposition by the taxi industry remains strong. They claim that the introduction of ride-hailing services will result in unfair competition due to their low prices, and take jobs away from professional drivers without solving the core issue of not having enough drivers.

In a statement released last week, the National Federation of Automobile Transport Workers union said that the implementation of ride-hailing services will exacerbate the driver shortage.

“The safety of passengers and benefits will be reduced, (with) bus and taxi companies experiencing a further decline in revenue and taxi drivers receiving lower pay, resulting in a more severe driver shortage,” they said.

The government plan aims to at least partially address the issue by easing taxi industry regulations, to entice more people to become drivers. It proposes getting rid of the geography test, given the prevalence of navigation technology, as well as shortening parts of their training period.



Russian President Vladimir Putin attends a meeting near Moscow on Dec. 12. SPUTNIK / POOL / VIA REUTERS

U.S. allies fear loss as Ukraine aid stalls

NATALIA DROZDIK, MILDA SEPUTYTE
AND PETER MARTIN
BLOOMBERG

The impasse over aid from the U.S. and Europe has Ukraine's allies contemplating something they've refused to imagine since the earliest days of Russia's invasion: that Russian President Vladimir Putin may win.

With more than \$110 billion in assistance mired in political disputes in Washington and Brussels, how long Kyiv will be able to hold back Russian forces and defend Ukraine's cities, power plants and ports against missile attacks is increasingly in question.

Beyond the potentially catastrophic consequences for Ukraine, some European allies have begun to quietly consider the impact of a failure for NATO in the biggest conflict in Europe since World War II. They're reassessing the risks an emboldened Russia would pose to alliance members in the east, according to people familiar with the internal conversations who asked for anonymity to discuss matters that aren't public.

The ripple effects would be felt around the world, the people said, as U.S. partners and allies questioned just how reliable Washington's promises of defense would be.

The impact of such a strategic setback

would be far deeper than that caused by the spectacle of the botched U.S. pullout from Afghanistan in 2021, they said. And that's leaving aside the prospect that former U.S. President Donald Trump might win next year's presidential election, realize his public pledges to pull back from major alliances, including NATO, and make a deal with Putin over Ukraine.

The growing sense of alarm has slipped into leaders' public statements. They've taken on an increasingly shrill tone as backers of the aid exhort their opponents not to hold the vital assistance hostage to domestic political priorities, something which rarely happened in previous debates.

“If Ukraine doesn't have support from the EU and the U.S., then Putin will win,” Irish Prime Minister Leo Varadkar said last week at the European Union summit, where leaders failed to overcome growing opposition to next year's €50 billion (\$55 billion) aid package and only barely managed to approve the largely symbolic gesture of opening the way to membership for Ukraine sometime in the future.

Speaking at a news conference in Kyiv on Tuesday, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy denied that Ukraine is starting to lose the war, pointing to the advances his forces have made since the early days of the

invasion and the support he has received from Ukraine's allies. “We have challenges,” he said, mentioning the delays with foreign aid and shortages of artillery shells.

All the same, U.S. President Joe Biden last week pledged to back Ukraine for “as long as we can,” a rhetorical shift from previous vows to do so for “as long as it takes.” Hard-line Republicans in Congress have refused to approve \$61 billion of support for next year until Biden gives in to their demands for tougher policies on the U.S. southern border. So far, efforts to reach a deal have failed. Monday, the Pentagon warned that the money for new weapons for Ukraine will run out Dec. 30 if legislators don't act.

In addition to growing public skepticism about the cost of support for Ukraine, the disappointing results of Kyiv's counteroffensive this summer — its troops made only modest gains against Russia's heavily entrenched forces — have fueled questions about whether Ukraine's publicly declared goal of retaking all the territory occupied by Putin is realistic. Lately, allied officials have sought to highlight Kyiv's more recent military successes, including its successful strikes on the Russian navy in the Black Sea, rather than the sweeping advances on the ground seen in the first year of war.

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Kabukicho arrests tied to prostitution nearly triple

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STAFF WRITER

Tokyo police said Wednesday that this year they had arrested 140 women for alleged prostitution in Shinjuku's Kabukicho entertainment district, nearly triple the figure from last year.

Some 43% of those arrested from the start of the year through Tuesday said they went into prostitution to pay for host services and so-called underground male idols. About 80% were in their 20s, while three were age 19 or younger.

“I have been going to (a host club) every day where a host I met on social media works,” said a woman in her 20s who was among those arrested, adding that she had loans that needed to be repaid.

The issue of young women going into prostitution as a result of receiving loans from hosts in order to finance host club visits has become a huge problem in recent months. Such pay-later schemes enable a male host to gradually increase the cost of his companionship — with this at times amounting to millions of yen. When the customer is unable to pay immediately, the host offers to take on the debt.

The Kabukicho district has become a symbol of hosts and host clubs who encourage female customers to spend excessive amounts, only to shoulder their resulting debt and then have them repay through money earned from prostitution.

In November, the National Police Agency issued a notice to prefectural police nationwide telling them to crack down on host clubs that allow customers to order drinks even though the establishment is aware they can't afford them.

Earlier this month, Tokyo police raided 202 host clubs and similar clubs in Kabukicho, of which 75% were found to be in violation of the law, including by failing to clearly state the prices of their services. Ten outlets did not have a proper list of employees, while 11 clubs had allegedly been operating without a proper license.

The entertainment business law obliges businesses to make their prices clear and easily noticeable to customers. In some of the host clubs, the price list was placed in hard-to-see locations or excluded prices for certain drinks and champagne towers.

Information from Jiji and Kyodo added

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Court disqualifies Trump from Colorado poll

MAGGIE ASTOR
THE NEW YORK TIMES

Colorado's top court ruled on Tuesday that former U.S. President Donald Trump is disqualified from holding office again because he engaged in insurrection with his actions leading up to the storming of the Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021, an explosive ruling that is likely to put the basic contours of the 2024 election in the hands of the U.S. Supreme Court.

The Colorado Supreme Court was the first in the nation to find that Section 3 of the 14th Amendment — which disqualifies people who engage in insurrection against the Constitution after taking an oath to support it — applies to Trump, an argument that his opponents have been making around the country.

The ruling directs the Colorado secretary of state to exclude Trump's name from the state's Republican primary ballot. It does not address the general election.

“We do not reach these conclusions lightly,” a four-justice majority wrote, with three justices dissenting. “We are mindful of the magnitude and weight of the questions



now before us. We are likewise mindful of our solemn duty to apply the law, without fear or favor, and without being swayed by public reaction to the decisions that the law mandates we reach.”

Trump's campaign said immediately that it would appeal the decision to the U.S. Supreme Court, a likelihood that the Colorado justices anticipated by putting their ruling on hold until January. And while

Former U.S. President Donald Trump delivers remarks during a presidential campaign rally in Reno, Nevada, on Sunday. BLOOMBERG

Tuesday's ruling applies only to one state, it could all but force the nation's highest court to decide the question for all 50.

“It's hard for me to see how they don't take this one, because this certainly seems to be one of those questions that requires some national resolution,” said Anthony Michael Kreis, an assistant professor of law at Georgia State University who has closely followed the Colorado case and related lawsuits around the country.

If the justices take up the case, it will join a pile of other Trump-related matters they have agreed or are likely to decide, including whether he is immune from criminal prosecution for actions he took in office and the scope of an obstruction charge that is central to his federal Jan. 6 case.

The U.S. Supreme Court has a 6-3 conservative majority, with three justices appointed by Trump himself, and it is already under extraordinary political pressure and scrutiny both for its rulings and its justices' ethics.

“Once again, the Supreme Court is being thrust into the center of a U.S. presidential

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