

Opposition calls for more aid and deployments

Noto quake response faces scrutiny

◆Focus
GABRIELE NINIVAGGI
STAFF WRITER

Despite what was largely seen as a swift response to the 7.6 magnitude earthquake that hit the Sea of Japan coast on New Year's Day, a week later the government is catching some flak from the opposition.

Sixteen hours into the new year on Jan. 1, the Hokuriku region was shaken by a powerful quake with its epicenter on the Noto Peninsula, a sparsely populated strip of land stretching out into the Sea of Japan.

One hour later, Prime Minister Fumio Kishida reached his office and set out to discuss the initial response to the disaster. Later in the day, he raised the level of alert and established a task force to coordinate the administration's approach.

Atsushi Koga, a state minister in the Cabinet, was sent to the area together with officials from the central government. One day later, Kishida announced his intention to postpone a New Year's news conference in

Ise, Mie Prefecture — which he did — to prioritize the response to the disaster.

Fears of a fatal tsunami, evoking painful memories of the Great East Japan Earthquake in March 2011, subsided relatively quickly and the attention turned to the rescue efforts and the provision of shelters to evacuees.

The geographical remoteness of the Noto Peninsula, coupled with largely unfavorable weather conditions, has posed a significant challenge to operations from day one. The quake disrupted land access to the peninsula and knocked out the tiny airport serving the region, while for days capsized ships impeded the establishment of a sea route.

In the immediate aftermath of the disaster, Kishida made sure to keep an open channel with the media, answering questions from reporters on a daily basis.

Those initial efforts seem to have paid off among the public.

In a poll conducted by the JNN television network last weekend, 57% of respondents said they thought the government's reaction was speedy, while only 32% expressed a dissenting opinion.



Opposition parties have taken issue with the number of Self-Defense Forces personnel deployed to Ishikawa Prefecture after the New Year's Day earthquake, drawing comparisons with the 2016 earthquake in Kumamoto Prefecture, after which approximately 15,000 troops were sent in the first two days. KYODO

But as time passed, scrutiny of the government's handling of the disaster grew louder, especially around two aspects: the number of Self-Defense Forces deployed to the area and financial support for evacuees.

After a meeting between the leaders of ruling and opposition parties last week, Kenta Izumi, the leader of the Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan (CDP), the largest opposition party, suggested the government should have sent a larger number of SDF members in the first place, instead of gradually expanding the contingent little by little.

CDP Secretary-General Katsuya Okada



SPORTS:
IN THE DRIVER'S SEAT
Ayao Komatsu takes over as Haas F1 boss | **PAGE 7**



SPOTLIGHT:
A BUMPER YEAR FOR LITERATURE
Anticipated reads to brighten your 2024 | **PAGE 10**

IN TODAY'S NYT:
ITALIAN TOWN WITH A MILD CLIMATE LURES FLOWER LOVERS
PAGE 3



Post Office scandal in U.K. puts Fujitsu in the firing line

PETER HUTCHISON
LONDON
AFP-JJI

A Japanese technology giant is in the cross-hairs of British lawmakers for building the faulty accounting software that led to what has been called the country's biggest-ever miscarriage of justice.

Fujitsu created the Horizon IT system that resulted in some 700 local post office managers being wrongly convicted for theft and false accounting between 1999 and 2005.

The U.K. government, which plans to exonerate all victims, has warned the company will be "held to account" if a public inquiry finds it guilty of wrongdoing.

MPs are calling for billions of dollars of government contracts with Fujitsu to be reexamined amid public outrage over the scandal, ignited by a hit TV drama aired last week.

Lawmakers are due to grill Fujitsu bosses next week when they are hauled in front of the U.K. Parliament select committee that scrutinizes the spending of the government's business department.

"We're determined to uncover whether Fujitsu put profit before people," the business committee's chair, Labour MP Liam Byrne, said.

"Someone must have known things were not right while innocent lives were being ruined by evidence that was simply unsafe. "So we've got to know who at Fujitsu knew what when, and crucially did they raise warnings, or keep the truth to themselves," he added.

A spokesperson for Fujitsu said the company was "fully committed to supporting the inquiry in order to understand what happened and to learn from it."

They added that Fujitsu "has apologized for its role" in the suffering of subpostmasters — the local post office managers.

The United Kingdom's state-owned Post Office began installing Horizon IT in the late 1990s but flaws in its programming showed that money had gone missing from the subpostmasters' branch accounts when it had not.

Postal service executives, refusing to acknowledge problems with the software, forced workers to repay the shortfalls.

Continued on page 2 →

Nikkei breaches 35,000 level for the first time in 34 years

◎Analysis
KAZUAKI NAGATA
STAFF WRITER

The benchmark 225-issue Nikkei average continued to climb on Thursday, topping the 35,000 level and marking a fresh 34-year high for a third straight day.

The Nikkei closed at 35,049.86 points, up by 608.14 points from the previous day for its highest finish since February 1990.

The broader Topix index also rose

38.39 points to 2,482.87 points, also its highest in nearly 34 years.

Gains on Wall Street and the weak yen in relation to the dollar were some of the short-term triggers for the Nikkei's rise above the 35,000 level, said Yutaka Miura, a senior technical analyst at Mizuho Securities.

U.S. stocks had fallen in the beginning of the year but rebounded on the strength of tech shares over the past few days. The yen had also appreciated to nearly ¥140 to a dollar last week, but it has weakened again to the ¥145 mark this week.

"I believe the conditions have been favorable for Japanese stocks to rise sharply," Miura said, adding that Wall Street and the yen will likely continue to influence the domestic market.

Another domestic factor possibly contributing to the advance of Japanese shares is the revamped tax-free investing program known as NISA — Nippon Individual Savings Account — that started this month.

"It's unclear how much NISA investments have affected the domestic stock market, but I think there has been a sense of expectation

that the new NISA would bring in purchases and this has supported the market," Miura said.

Although Japanese stocks appear to have gotten off to a strong start this year, the rally seems rapid, so "(the Nikkei) could easily fall about 1,000 points or 1,500 points," depending on the swings of the yen and U.S. stocks, Miura said.

The trend of a weak yen is expected to remain for a few months at least, as the Bank of Japan has given no indication that it would end its negative rate policy, which is

seen as a first step toward policy normalization, at its meeting later this month.

Many market observers also predict that the magnitude 7.6 earthquake that struck central Japan on Jan. 1 has raised the bar for the BOJ to change its dovish policy, as the central bank will likely carefully assess the economic impact of the disaster.

A slew of economists believe that the central bank will scrap the negative rates in the spring, which could prompt the yen's appreciation to possibly shift the weak yen trend.

Continued on page 3 →

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INSIDE TODAY			
NATIONAL	2	OPINION	8
BUSINESS	3	BILINGUAL	9
INSIGHTS	4	SPOTLIGHT	10
WORLD	5, 6		
WEATHER	6		
SPORTS	7		

Russia accused of foul play
Ukraine a "test site" for North Korean missiles, South Korea says | **WORLD, PAGE 5**

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U.S.-China ties likely to fray further in 2024

◎Analysis
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When it comes to Sino-U.S. relations, things are likely to get worse in 2024 before they get better.

After a year that saw ties between Washington and Beijing tumble to their lowest point in decades, signals are growing that this trend will continue as the two super-power rivals vie to outdo each other on the global stage.

U.S. Ambassador to China Nicholas Burns threw this view into sharp relief with remarks last month about the trajectory of the relationship.

"I don't feel optimistic about the future of U.S.-China relations," he said during an event at the Brookings Institution think tank. "I feel that we need to see how things develop."

U.S. President Joe Biden's administration has long been cautious about the future of the relationship, unleashing a flurry of moves to rein in Beijing's geopolitical and economic



ambitions, including tough measures on the export of advanced technology to China.

Asked about U.S. policy priorities toward China in 2024, State Department spokesman Matthew Miller told a news conference this month that Washington would continue to work with allies and partners "to respond to coercive actions" that Beijing had taken with respect to its neighbors "while trying to manage the relationship ... responsibly and appropriately."

Biden and Chinese leader Xi Jinping met in November for a summit that attempted to

In his New Year's speech, Xi took a stronger tone on Taiwan than his previous address last year, saying China "will surely be reunified" with Taiwan, though he did not mention military moves.
AFP-JJI

calm the waters and tried to convey a sense that the two sides could effectively manage their differences.

But Chinese officials — including Xi — have also signaled that a drastic improvement in ties is unlikely this year.

At a rare Communist Party conference on Dec. 27, Xi and top government officials said China would escalate its challenge to the U.S.-led world order, mapping out a strategy to raise Beijing's influence on the global stage "to a new level."

"It is imperative to carry forward our fighting spirit. We must reject all acts of power politics and bullying, and vigorously defend our national interests and dignity," a government statement said, in an allusion to what it sees as Washington's push to rein in Beijing's growing clout.

In a message to mark the 45th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries, Xi reiterated Beijing's view that "adhering to mutual respect, peaceful coexistence, and win-win cooperation is the correct way for China and the United States to interact."

Continued on page 5 →

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