

# Abe won't be mediator in Tehran: official

With limited influence on U.S. sanctions, prime minister's hands are tied

## ◎Analysis

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Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is set to start his two-day visit to Tehran on Wednesday amid rising military tensions in the Persian Gulf.

Abe's planned visit — the first visit to Iran by an incumbent Japanese prime minister in 41 years — came to light after he met U.S. President Donald Trump in Tokyo late last month. The timing has prompted some to speculate that Abe may be delivering a message from Trump to Tehran, to try to defuse the crisis over the nuclear deal.

But days before the trip, high-ranking Japanese diplomats in Tokyo started emphasizing a somewhat unexpected message likely to cool the developing media frenzy: Abe is not visiting Iran as a mediator nor messenger, and he does not have any quick remedy to end the nuclear crisis.

"The primary purpose is to ease tensions and prevent the status quo from deteriorating further. We have no surprise plan," one high-ranking Foreign Ministry official said Friday.

"The prime minister won't go there as a mediator or messenger. Japan is not standing for either of the two sides," the official also said, speaking on condition of anonymity.

Based on discussions with multiple officials in Tokyo, it seems the intention was to lower expectations toward Abe's trip, during which he is expected to meet with President Hassan Rouhani, in order to minimize risks to his diplomatic mission in Iran.

Japan-based Middle East experts have warned Abe could return empty-handed, highlighting that Tokyo has little diplomatic leverage to encourage Washington's return to the 2015 nuclear deal and thereby ease U.S.-led economic sanctions against Iran.

"If Iran was raising tensions, it would be meaningful for Abe to go and ask Tehran to change its position. But it is the U.S. that started raising tensions" by withdrawing from the 2015 nuclear deal, said Yasuyuki Matsunaga, professor of international relations at Tokyo University of Foreign Studies and a noted Middle East expert.

"There is nothing Abe could offer (to ease economic problems for Iran). So I wonder what results he could secure" during his visit to Tehran, he said.

In 2015, the U.S., the U.K., France, Germany, Russia and China signed the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) under which Iran has drastically reduced its number of uranium enrichment machines and has accepted inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to counter long-held U.S. suspicions that Tehran is trying to develop nuclear weapons.

In return, those countries have eased key economic sanctions against Iran, and the IAEA has confirmed Tehran continues to comply with its obligations under the 2015 accord.

But in May last year, the Trump administration declared it would withdraw from the nuclear deal, which had been signed by his predecessor, Barack Obama.

Trump reinstated all U.S. economic sanctions against Iran, which has drastically reduced Iran's oil exports and badly hurt the oil-dependent Iranian economy.

The sanctions have also pushed the Iranian rial down to less than a third its previous value, sparking sharp inflation that is plaguing the Iranian people.

In response Tehran has scaled back some commitments under the 2015 nuclear accord, and threatened to resume enriching uranium to a higher degree in early July unless the European signatory countries address Iran's severe economic problems.

Matsunaga said Tehran will welcome Abe's visit because it would emphasize the fact that Japan recognizes Iran as a country of great importance.

But Abe is unable to offer anything to

*Continued on page 2*→



Protesters holding umbrellas and placards march as t  
extradition law in Hong Kong on Sunday. AP

## Double-election

KYODO

Speculation that Prime Minister Shinzo Abe will dissolve the Lower House for a "double election" this summer began to dissipate Monday, as an official close to him said such a move would not be needed when the Cabinet has stable support.

Some had speculated that the prime minister would be tempted to call a snap election to coincide with the triennial election for half of the Upper House, in an apparent bid to boost voter interest and turnout.

There were also expectations that Abe would delay the planned consumption tax hike in October and seek a mandate for his decision.

However, the general view of ruling party lawmakers now seems to be that current eco-

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45-year-old Satoru Taguchi, who had formed a team with other fathers from his children's school.  
"My body is really sore."  
The next "Isu-1" Grand Prix takes place in Iwate Prefecture next month.

## Sunday

■ Ceremony at Sea Forest Waterway in Tokyo, which became operational this month ahead of 2020 Tokyo Olympics and Paralympics.

# Abe not a mediator: official

→ Continued from page 1

resolve the fundamental problems confronting Iran, he said.

"For Japan to mediate between Iran and the U.S. or to help form a new nuclear deal, it would first need to push the U.S. back to its original position (under the 2015 agreement). But it's impossible," said Koichiro Tanaka, professor at Keio University and an expert in Iranian affairs.

"So what Abe could do (through his visit) is to ease tensions for the time being. It won't last very long, though," he said.

Tanaka also warned that if Japan is seen as any kind of messenger serving U.S. interests, it would damage Japan's bilateral relationship with Iran.

Despite being a close military ally of the U.S. in the Asia-Pacific region, Japan has for years maintained a good relationship with Middle Eastern countries with conflicting interests, including Iran, Israel and Saudi Arabia.

Unlike the U.S., Japan has supported the JCPOA deal, but has stopped importing crude oil from Iran due to the U.S.-led economic sanctions.

Another senior Foreign Ministry official argued that easing tensions for now would still be meaningful, citing the possibility of an accidental military clash in the Persian Gulf.

In the last month the White House has dispatched aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln and B-52 strategic bombers in the region, raising tensions another notch.

The U.S. deployment was followed by

sporadic attacks by unidentified parties on crude oil pipelines in Saudi Arabia, the U.S. Embassy in Iraq and commercial ships just outside the Persian Gulf.

"No one wants to start a war. Both (Iran and the U.S.) want to settle (the crisis) through dialogue, and they believe the status quo is not good," the official said.

"In that sense, it's meaningful (for Abe) to go to Iran now" to ease tensions in the region, the official said.

In fact, Trump referred to Abe's plans to visit Tehran while in Tokyo on May 27, at the outset of his summit meeting with the Japanese prime minister, telling reporters: "I know that the prime minister and Japan have a very good relationship with Iran, so we'll see what happens."

"The prime minister has already spoken to me about that. And I do believe that Iran would like to talk. And if they'd like to talk, we'd like to talk also," Trump added.

Still, despite Trump's remarks, some remain concerned that hard-liners within the Trump administration, most notably national security adviser John Bolton and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, may be more interested in changing Iran's political regime by maintaining economic sanctions, rather than engaging in diplomacy to ease tensions with Iran.

If this situation continues, it could trigger an accidental military clash between Iran and the U.S. and escalate into war, noted Tanaka of Keio University.



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Nagafuji collected 137,862 votes, against 123,771 votes garnered by Tomoaki Nomura, 45, a former Sakai Municipal Assembly member, and 14,110 votes by Takashi Tachibana, 51, a former assembly member for Katsushika Ward, Tokyo.

Sunday's election came after former Mayor Osami Takeyama stepped down in April to take responsibility for a political funding scandal. During his campaign, Nagafuji harshly criticized Takeyama's funding scandal and pledged to pursue strong growth in Osaka Prefecture through closer collaboration with the Osaka prefectural and municipal governments. On the metropolis plan, he said he would closely observe developments from the Osaka Municipal Government.



Hideki Nagafuji, won the mayoral election in Sakai, Osaka Prefecture, on Sunday. KYODO

"wearing neels makes me reel un-  
my feet got sweaty," he added.

The event, organized by petition Change.org to "reflect upon idea conditions from one's feet," questioned the necessity of heels in the workplace from various viewpoints as it challenged norms in Japan.

"I hope there will come a time when women don't have to wear heels in the workplace. ... Why do we have to wear heels while working when men are allowed to wear flat shoes?" asked Yumi Ishikawa.

# VR, wrecked used to keep memory of 3/11 alive

## Regional Voices: Tohoku

KAHOKU SHIMPO

Conveying the fear of when a massive earthquake and tsunami strike is no easy task.

But eight years on from the disaster that shook the nation to its core, schools, municipalities and museums in the Tohoku region devastated by the Great East Japan Earthquake in March 2011 are trying to keep the memory of the national crisis alive and raise awareness of the importance of disaster prevention.

The city of Akita created a tsunami simulation system incorporating virtual reality. When viewers walked through a mock-up of the city in the event of a massive earthquake, they were able to get a more realistic experience of what would happen should a disaster strike.

The simulation system, and an accompanying video, shows what would happen in the event that an earthquake with a magnitude of 8.7 hit the sea off Akita Bay, triggering an upper 6 quake on the seismic intensity scale in the city. Takanobu Kamataki, an associate professor at Akita University, oversaw the system and video.

The city created the system in part to convey the realism and fear conveyed in VR and the video clip will raise awareness of disaster prevention.

A trial event was held on Monday in Tsuchizaki Ward, where Akita Bay meets the city.

The participants put on VR devices and watched the short clip showing a tsunami engulfing Tsuchizaki Ward. It showed a situation in which participants were unable to make their journey home as one of the roads was caved in. Then the participants tried to reach the