**In Abe Cabinet, pathogen talks take back seat to calligraphy, sake**

Outrage is growing over Cabinet members who partied and celebrated with their constituents instead of attending a mandatory meeting on the coronavirus outbreak, the biggest public health scare to hit Japan in years.

According to the Cabinet Secretariat, the government’s coronavirus task force has held 11 meetings since the emergency headquarters led by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe was created on Jan. 30. A total of nine ministers have skipped such meetings, despite the required attendance of all Cabinet members.

“Frankly speaking, I think the number of (no-shows) is too high,” Hiroshi Moriyama, the Diet Affairs Committee chairman of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party, told reporters. “I urge ministers to attend these important meetings.”

Environment Minister Shinjiro Koizumi on Feb. 18 admitted that he missed the Feb. 16 task force meeting. But he made matters worse for himself by waffling when asked if he skipped the session to attend a New Year’s party with his constituents in his electoral district of Yokosuka, Kanagawa Prefecture. “I saw the partygoers’ blogs and Facebook posts. It was a New Year’s party. Am I correct? I saw sake drinks being served there,” Hiranao Honda, a member of the Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan, asked Koizumi at a Lower House Budget Committee session on Feb. 19.

Koizumi remained ambiguous, “Yeah, Mr. Honda is right.”

Honda repeatedly pressed Koizumi: “Say the words ‘New Year’s party.’ Say that sake was served. With your own lips.”Koizumi finally relented: “If that’s what Mr. Honda wants, it was a New Year’s party and sake was served there.” The environment minister said his absence did not matter because he sent his parliamentary secretary to the meeting on his behalf, and that his actions were “in line with crisis management guidelines.” Koizumi then said, “I accept your concerns with sincerity and reflect on myself.”

His self-reflection did not end the criticism. “It’s unbelievable,” a former Cabinet member said. “We are in the middle of widespread infections. Yet, (he) gave priority to attending a New Year’s party with his supporters.” A high-ranking LDP official said Koizumi’s conduct “cannot be severely criticized enough. What egregious behavior. He is not up to it as a Cabinet member. He should offer profuse apologies,” the official said. Noritoshi Ishida, Policy Research Council chairman of the LDP’s junior coalition partner, Komeito, said at a news conference that the task force meetings are “predicated on the attendance of all Cabinet members.” Koizumi was “due to attend” the meeting, Ishida said.

But the rookie Cabinet minister was not alone in mixing up priorities.

Justice Minister Masako Mori and education minister Koichi Hagiuda also skipped the Feb. 16 meeting, not because of official duties, but for their own political activities. When the task force meeting was under way in the capital and reports continued to surface about additional coronavirus infections, Mori was visiting a museum in her hometown and electoral district of Iwaki, Fukushima Prefecture. “A once-a-year calligraphy exhibition was going on at a calligraphy museum in Iwaki, and I attended the awards ceremony to make a speech,” she said at the Lower House Budget Committee session, replying to questions from Honda.

Mori said her parliamentary secretary attended the task force meeting on her behalf.

But Honda brought up another issue: Mori’s message posted on her official Facebook page on Feb. 16. The justice minister’s post featured a picture of Abe and others in the task force meeting along with a link to a report about the talks issued by the prime minister’s office. “The 10th novel coronavirus task force meeting was held today,” Mori wrote. She made no mention of the calligraphy exhibition.

“You wrote that on Facebook as if you were at the meeting. But you weren’t!” Honda said. “We all know that you were at the awards ceremony.”

Hagiuda, meanwhile, explained that he skipped the task force meeting in Tokyo because he was at a party in his electoral district to honor the chief of a volunteer fire brigade. The party was held in Hachioji, which is in Tokyo.

Kensuke Onishi, a member of the Democratic Party for the People who also raised questions at the Lower House Budget Committee session, said: “Three Cabinet members missed an important meeting by making their hometown political activities a priority. Does this administration really have a sense of urgency?”

Abe, the head of the coronavirus task force, also could not avoid criticism. He did attend the task force meeting held on the early evening of Feb. 14--but for only eight minutes. He then had a long dinner with guests who included an executive of Nikkei Inc. “(Abe) spent only eight minutes at the meeting but three hours at a dinner afterward. What in the world is he doing?” a person wrote on social media. “Abe was having dinner with young lawmakers the day before,” another poster wrote. “Oh, and he dined at the prime minister’s official residence before that.”