

Japanese business mood rises to six-year high

Japanese business confidence has soared to its highest level in six years, according to the Bank of Japan's latest Tankan survey

The big manufacturers' index rose to plus-16 from plus-12 in September's survey, exceeding market forecasts. Large companies also plan to increase their capital spending by 4.6 percent next year, the survey showed. The results indicate the government's stimulus policies, aimed at spurring growth, may be starting to take effect.

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has taken aggressive steps in recent months to end nearly two decades of deflation — or falling consumer prices — in the economy. Analysts said the survey's results indicate his policies, also known as Abenomics, were starting to have an impact.



"The general Abenomics-related boost and the weak yen have helped, along with the monetary easing by the Bank of Japan," said Marcel Theliant, Japan economist

at Capital Economics in Singapore. "We had a lot of fiscal and monetary stimulus. These measures have certainly helped in the short term." However, the key question

was whether the measures can create a longer term improvement in the economy. "The structural reform measures have been rather disappointing so far," he said.

Farmers' leaders protest over 'green' subsidy plan

Farmers' leaders have urged ministers not to bring in plans to cut subsidies by 15 percent and transfer cash to wildlife protection in England and Wales



The National Farmers Union (NFU) has written to every MP, saying the plan to share £3.5bn of farm grants would disadvantage British farmers. The NFU also warns MPs that going ahead with the move would risk rural votes. The government said the money would help to build on the 'success' of its environmental and rural growth schemes. Wildlife

groups have used newspaper advertisements to urge the government to keep its countryside commitments.

They also say votes are at stake as every household pays £400 a year to subsidise farmers — and people expect their money will be used to protect the environment, not just to shore up farmers' budgets. In the summer, the EU set the framework for how the money should be spent with its scheme to 'green' the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). The greening plans were heavily diluted under pressure from farmers, but large landowners will in future need to do more to collect subsidies by leaving existing grassland unploughed, diversifying their crops and setting aside some land for wildlife.

What is being decided is exactly how the farm subsidy pot for in England and Wales should be divided between conflicting interests. The decision is tough because the overall size of the pot has shrunk as Europe's leaders attempted to shrink the £50bn CAP.

Green groups say public money spent on subsidising farmers should go on public good like thriving wildlife and well-managed water catchment areas to retain water for use and to prevent flooding.

Amazon workers strike in Germany over pay



Employees of the internet giant Amazon are taking strike action in Germany in a long-running pay dispute

The Verdi Union said workers would strike at Amazon's logistic centres in Bad Hersfeld and Leipzig and also in Graben. The action coincides with the busy Christmas shopping period. Amazon employs more than 9,000 workers in Germany. Later on Monday, a delegation of German workers will also protest at Amazon's headquarters in Seattle. The union is planning further action in Germany in the town of Werne.

Verdi has called a series of strikes this year in an attempt to get the company to accept collective bargaining agreements for its staff. It says Amazon is not paying them comparable rates to

other warehouse staff in Germany, because the company has classified the staff as logistics workers, whose rates of pay are lower. Amazon says that they are well paid compared with other logistics workers in the country. The union is also unhappy with what it calls the company's practice of 'constant monitoring' of workers and what it says are impossible workplace targets.

Last month, an investigation into a UK-based Amazon warehouse found conditions a stress expert said could cause 'mental and physical illness'. Prof Michael Marmot was shown secret filming of night shifts involving up to 11 miles of walking at the warehouse — where an undercover worker was expected to collect orders every 33 seconds.

Stolen Egyptian relic turns up in Belgium

An ancient Egyptian statue stolen during the 2011 revolt against Hosni Mubarak has been found in Belgium

The piece dates back 2500 years and went missing from the Egyptian Museum during unrest on Tahrir Square. The piece was smuggled to Belgium where a French expert analysed it and contacted Egyptian officials. Egyptian ambassador to EU Ihan Fawzy told, "This relic is made up of two parts. The other is still in the museum in Egypt and this one will be returned to Cairo to complete the statue." Egypt regularly announces the discovery of stolen treasures. In November, it said it had found dozens of artefacts that had been put up for sale by an auction house in Jerusalem.

EU backs easy in-flight listening for air passengers

You are settling into your seat getting ready for take off when an air hostess taps you on the shoulder and tells you to turn your music off. Well, that annoying pre-flight ritual could become history. The European Commission confirmed that portable electronic devices may now also be used in 'flight mode' throughout the whole flight, from gate to gate. Previously, these had to be turned off completely during takeoff and landing. But the final decision will remain with airlines and pilots.

Ashmolean acquires major Chinese art collection

The Ashmolean Museum in Oxford has announced the acquisition of one of the world's most significant collections of modern Chinese art

Some 400 works were bequeathed by Chinese art expert Professor Michael Sullivan, who died in September. Many of the pieces by late 20th Century and contemporary Chinese artists have never been seen in public. The works will be displayed on rotation at the Ashmolean in a gallery dedicated to Sullivan and his wife Khoan. Some of the paintings have been loaned to the museum since 2000. They were collected by the couple on their extensive travels to China from the 1940s.

Much of the art was gained by the pair directly from the artists, and as gifts from those they made friends with. Among the most significant paintings are by Qi Baishi and Zhang Daqian, who both died in the mid-20th Century, and also include more recent acquisitions, including Landscrypt by Xu Bing, which was created in 2002.