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Abduction of Japanese Citizens by North Korea

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During the 1970s and 1980s, a number of Japanese citizens disappeared under strange circumstances, many of which are suspected to be incidents of abductions by North Korea.

The Genesis of the Abduction Issue¹

North Korean plans to abduct Japanese citizens were first devised in the mid-1970s and were a collateral damage of the failed assassination attempt on South Korean President Park Chun-hee in August 1974. The would-be assassin, Mun Se-hwang, was an ethnic Korean resident of Japan (Zainichi) and a sympathizer of the North Korean regime. Because of South Korea's tightening of security measures against potential North Korean spies, the North Korean intelligence community started to look elsewhere for recruits and began targeting Japanese citizens in order to use them for educating their own agents in the subtleties of Japanese language and culture.

The first suspected North Korean abduction of a Japanese national was that of Kume Yutaka, a fifty-two-year-old security guard who disappeared near the coast in Ishikawa Prefecture in September 1977. This marked the beginning of a six-year period in which another sixteen Japanese citizens vanished under mysterious circumstances. The abductees fell under three broad categories:

- (1) individuals, some of whom may have been deliberately targeted (Matsumoto Kyo⁻ ko,¹ October 1977²; Yokota Megumi, November 1977; Taguchi Yaeko, June 1978; Tanaka Minoru, June 1978; Soga Miyoshi and Hitomi, August 1978; Hara Tadaaki, June 1980);
- (2) couples on dates (Chimura Yasushi and Hamamoto Fukie, July 1978; Hasuike Kaoru and Okudo Yukiko, July 1978; Ichikawa Shu⁻ ichi and Masumoto Rumiko, August 1978); and
- (3) Japanese in Europe (Matsuki Kaoru 1980; Ishioka Jun, May 1980; Arimoto Keiko, July 1983). The three Japanese travelers in Europe were lured to North Korea by Japanese women who themselves had previously been enticed to the Stalinist state to marry members of Japan's Red Army Faction (Sekigunha), which was responsible for the hijacking of a Japanese airliner in 1970 (see Steinhoff 2004).

For more than two decades, the circumstances surrounding the missing Japanese would remain shrouded in mystery.

¹ Source: *Explaining Divergent Responses to the North Korean Abductions Issue in Japan and South Korea*, by Brad Williams and Erik Mobrand, in *The Journal of Asian Studies* Vol. 69, No 2 (May) 2010, pp 507-536.

² Matsumoto was formally recognized as an abductee in November 2006.

To date, the Japanese government has identified 17 Japanese citizens as victims of abduction by North Korea. There are also other cases which cannot be ruled out as cases of abduction by North Korea.

Handling of the Issue by Japan and North Korea

At the First Japan - North Korea Summit Meeting in September 2002, North Korea surprisingly acknowledged for the first time that it had abducted Japanese nationals. It informed Japan that only five abductees were surviving, eight had passed away, and there was no record of entry into North Korea for two others. Following the Summit, the five surviving abductees returned to Japan in October of that year.

In May 2004, the family members of the five surviving abductees went also back to Japan as a result of the Second Japan – North Korea Summit Meeting.

In November 2004, North Korea sent back the “remains” supposed to be those of Ms Yokota Megumi to her family in Japan. The Government of Japan conducted a DNA analysis and concluded that they could not be hers. However, the prestigious international journal *Nature* cast suspicions on Tokyo’s handling of the DNA analysis of Yokota Megumi’s remains which had been cremated.

In February 2006, Japan strongly reiterated its demands for North Korea to return the still missing abductees immediately and to extradite the perpetrators for prosecution.

In September 2006, after the launching of missiles by North Korea through the air space of Japan, Tokyo set up the Headquarters for the Abduction Issue. The Headquarters is headed by the Prime Minister as chief with the Chief Cabinet Secretary and Minister of State for the Abduction Issue as deputy chief and all other Cabinet ministers serving as members.

Japan also adopted a variety of retortion measures to ensure that North Korea be held accountable for its crimes. These included prohibition of visits of vessels from North Korea, various embargoes and restrictions on trade and exchanges with Pyongyang. In 2006, an important law was adopted in Japan to address the issue of human rights violations by North Korea, with amendments in 2007 to strengthen international cooperation on this front.

The most recent round of dialogue between Japan and North Korea took place in August 2008 with an agreement on the following components:

- The scope of the investigations will be the victims identified by the Government of Japan and other missing persons;
- North Korea will establish an investigation Committee with adequate authority;
- North Korea will notify the progress of the investigation and discuss it with Japan;
- When survivors are found, subsequent process will be discussed and agreed;

- North Korea will cooperate so that Japan will be able to directly confirm the results of the investigation;
- Both sides will continue to discuss other matters related to the investigation.

Yet, the DPRK has postponed the implementation of this agreement since then.

In addition, it is noteworthy that in 2009 Japan ratified the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance.

The abduction issue remains a grave matter concerning the national sovereignty of Japan as well as the lives and security of the Japanese people. Thus, the policy of the Government of Japan is that there can be no normalization of diplomatic ties with North Korea unless the abduction issue is resolved, and that the Japanese Government will continue to strongly demand North Korea to secure the safety of the abductees and return them immediately³. This policy was however weakened by the U.S. decision to remove North Korea from its list of states that sponsor terrorism in October 2008, despite intense Japanese lobbying.

Growing International Concern

In the last few years, the Government of Japan has been calling for international support to resolve this issue through the adoption of communiqués and resolutions referring to the abduction issue at summit meetings and other international conferences. This has led to a UN resolution.

At the UN Universal Periodic Review of North Korea held in Geneva in April 2009, it was also reported by the Japanese Union of Associations to Rescue Abductees from the DPRK that 4 Lebanese, 4 Malaysians, 3 French, 3 Italians, 2 Chinese, 2 Hollanders, 1 Thai, 1 Romanian, 1 Singaporean, and 1 Jordanian had been kidnapped and detained in North Korea⁴.

³ Some Japanese activists are also concerned about the fate of 93,000 Koreans who were repatriated from Japan to North Korea during the period of 20 years beginning in December 1959: 6,637 of them had Japanese citizenship and 1,828 were Japanese wives. The repatriation process was at its peak for 2 years from 1959 to 1961 when some 70,000 Koreans from Japan travelled to North Korea.

⁴ During the Korean War (1950-1953), many South Korean civilians were abducted by the DPRK authorities. In 1952, the Republic of Korea (ROK) government published a list of 82,959 abductees (farmers and workers, engineers, policemen, public service staff, medical doctors, professors and teachers). Most of them were abducted in first weeks after the outbreak of the Korean War on June 25. Submission of the “Centre Human Rights Peace-Korean War Abductees” to the Universal Periodic Review of North Korea in April 2009.

Since the 1953 Armistice, 3790 citizens of South Korea are believed to have been detained in North Korea. Most were returned but 485 abductees are thought to remain in North Korea. Some may have been trained as spies.

The North Korean delegation replied to the criticisms by saying that it would “take appropriate measures to prevent the recurrence of such unhappy issue.” It declared that a special committee was formed, nationwide investigations were conducted and the result thereof was communicated to the Japanese side. It considered that its obligations had been faithfully fulfilled under the various agreements with Japan and that the abduction issue was completely settled.

Recommendations of Human Rights Without Frontiers

1. North Korea should immediately follow-up the August 2008 agreement between Japan and North Korea, without further delay and in a comprehensive manner.
2. North Korea should set a concrete time frame and take concrete actions in order to resolve the abductions issue as soon as possible, including ensuring the immediate return of Japanese and other abductees.
3. North Korea should abide strictly by UN resolutions on the country and commit fully to upholding international law and ensuring the responsibility of those who perpetrated the crime of abduction;
4. North Korea should cooperate constructively with UN mechanisms and procedures on human rights, including the Special Rapporteur, and respond efficaciously to their recommendations.
5. North Korea should become a party to the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance, and implement it effectively as a gateway to engage with the world community and to underscore the need to comply with the international Rule of Law.