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Has the right hijacked the abductee issue in Japan?

by David McNeill and Andreas Hippin

[A year after five Japanese citizens kidnapped by North Korean spies returned to Japan, the authors suggest their plight is being exploited by extreme nationalists.]

North Korean leader Kim Jong Il, who says he has been "humiliated" by Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro and will never again talk to him, has formed a secret alliance with Saddam Hussein and Al Qaeda, even as his regime prepares thousands of gallons of chemical weapons to drop over Japan's cities. These stories come courtesy of Japan's best-selling weekly magazine, *Shukan Post*, with its ubiquitous unnamed "experts," who portray Kim as a cross between Dr. Evil and Charlie Chaplin, fuming and "stamping his feet in vexation" at Japanese skulduggery and cursing every time he hears the name "Koizumi."

Can the magazine name the insider in the House of Kim who is feeding the press these lurid quotes, or answer how Tokyo journalists have finally managed to clinch the evidence for the Axis of Evil alliance that has so far eluded everyone else? "We don't comment on sources," was the reply.

The stories are more fuel on the bonfire of reason and logic that has been burning away in Japan since October 2002, when five Japanese citizens, abducted by North Korea in a bizarre plot to recruit language teachers and spies, returned home to find themselves in the eye of a political storm. Amid Japanese allegations that they had been brainwashed and that the families they had left behind in North Korea were being held captive, the five stayed in Japan, in violation of an agreement that they would return to Pyongyang at the end of a two-week visit.

A barrage of TV coverage and documentaries about Pyongyang since then, together with dozens of angry editorials carried in the conservative *Yomiuri* and *Sankei* newspapers, add up to a media campaign tinged with hysteria. Right-wing Tokyo Governor Ishihara Shintaro's suggestions that the North Koreans snatched and possibly murdered as many as 150 Japanese citizens at the height of the cold war, are now widely believed. A recent Fuji Television docudrama went one step further, suggesting 360+ Japanese had been kidnapped.

The abductee issue dominated Japanese press coverage of the summer 2003 six-nation talks in Beijing on North Korea's nuclear ambitions and the security of Northeast Asia. Pyongyang responded to demands to resolve the problem of the abductees, however, by repeating its claim that Japan broke its promise to send the five returnees back.

The hysteria has spooked many ordinary Japanese. In a poll conducted by the Cabinet Office in January 2003, nearly 80 percent of the 2,126 respondents said they believe Japan could be drawn into a war, most likely with North Korea. Random media surveys have little problem now finding youngsters who believe that Japan should "strike first" to avoid the unpredictable ire of Pyongyang.

Not good for a peaceful resolution to the problems between the two countries perhaps, but a gift for hawks who have been arguing for years that Tokyo should take a tougher line against North Korea.

One of the two major organizations campaigning on the issue is The National Association for the Rescue of Japanese Kidnapped by North Korea (NARKN), whose chairperson is Sato Katsumi, a nationalist who says the only "real politicians" in Japan are Ishihara Shintaro and Nishimura Shingo.

Tokyo governor Ishihara famously believes Japan should "go to war" with Pyongyang, while Nishimura achieved overnight fame in 1997 when he planted the Japanese flag on a rocky, windswept island known here as Senkaku (or Diaoyu in China) in the East China Sea, signalling what he said was "The revival of a proud Japan and an awakening of people's consciousness." In 1999, he was forced to resign from his post as vice minister of the Defence Agency after suggesting that Japan should consider acquiring a nuclear arsenal.

Sato is listed as an "academic supporter" of the Restoration Party – New Wind (Ishin Seitō – Shinpū), a group that advocates the "overthrow of the post-war system and the return to the true form of our national character." Links to this party; to Nishimura's Web site, and various other hard-right causes can be found on local chapters of the NARKN Web site. There is no acknowledgement in these sites of past atrocities by Japanese forces on the Korean Peninsula in the course of nearly half a century of colonial rule. In an interview for this article Sato said, "The comfort women were paid prostitutes," referring to the thousands of Korean and other women who were forced into sexual slavery by the Imperial Army -- a characteristic neonationalist comment.

Does Sato deny using the plight of the kidnap victims for political ends?

"Of course not," he said. "We've tried for years to get people here to understand what Pyongyang was doing, but people only woke up last October. If we don't use it we'll never solve the North Korean issue." The key to solving the issue for Sato, Ishihara, Nishimura and their supporters is sanctions against North Korea backed by an aggressive foreign policy and the threat of military action. "We've had 25 years of trouble from Pyongyang," says Sato. "Now we need to show we mean business."

It is a position that, according to Choe Kwan Ik., editor of the *People's Korea in Japan*, is a recipe for disaster. "The media and the right in Japan, under the influence of Washington, are trying to frame North Korea, with the ultimate aim of forcing a regime change. It means that no progress is possible between the two countries, and time is running out for a solution."

The hostile stance worries Gregory Clark, former Australian diplomat and *Japan Times* columnist. "The North Korean issue is clearly being manipulated by hard-line and right-wing elements who have been looking for a way to get at Pyongyang for years," he said. "The hardliners have been able to take every conciliatory gesture by North Korea and turn it into a reason for confrontation."

The hard-line agenda also sits uneasily with at least some members of the families they are supposed to be representing, including the most famous face of the campaign, Yokota Shigeru, whose daughter Megumi was snatched from near her home in Niigata Prefecture.

"We know Sato is a right-winger but we need all the help we can get from whoever we get it from," he said. We just want the country to help us get our loved ones back."

Yokota heads a second support organisation, set up by the families themselves. While lacking the right-wing links of NARKN, its politicisation has been quite sharp since last year. Much of its real leadership is provided by Secretary General Hasuike Toru, brother of kidnap victim Kaoru and an associate of several NARKN figures. Under his guidance, the families have found themselves supporting some very hard-line causes. Last December, for instance, they were guests at a forum organised by Japanese Society for History Textbook Reform (Tsukurukai), which wants to include the North Korean kidnappings in its high school textbooks in place of references to comfort women and other Japanese war crimes.

The figure who has benefited most politically, however, from the fallout of the abductee issue is LDP lawmaker Abe Shinzo, once a "non-entity," in the words of Tokyo expose magazine *Uwasa no Shinso*, who has leveraged himself into one of the country's top political jobs by standing shoulder to shoulder with the families. As the *Japan Times* wrote on Sept. 22 this year, "It was Abe who decided that the five former abductees...should stay in Japan despite an earlier plan that they would go back to Pyongyang within two weeks. The returnees and their relatives place great trust in [him]."

The grandson of former prime minister, Kishi Nobusuke, who mixed with some of the most notorious ultra-nationalist and Yakuza figures in Japan, Abe was rewarded for months of Pyongyang-baiting with the post of secretary-general of the LDP in the September 2003 reshuffle of the Koizumi cabinet. Abe is another supporter of educational "revisions" and regular visits to Yasukuni Shrine, which honors millions of war dead, including a number of convicted and hanged war criminals. His homepage includes a link to The Modern Korea Institute, NARKN's sister organization.

Interesting to note too, that the recent targets of ultra-right attacks, Hitoshi Tanaka (the senior Foreign Ministry official whose contacts with a high-placed North Korean official led to last year's short-lived breakthrough in relations) and former LDP heavyweight Nonaka Hiromu (who recently announced his resignation from politics), were both Abe opponents. (See Tessa Morris Suzuki's *Japan Watch* article, "When is a Terrorist Not a Terrorist?" and Wada Haruki's "Recovering a Lost Opportunity.")

Okadome Yasunori, chief editor of *Uwasa no Shinso*, says Abe's hawkish position is very much in tune with the policies of the current U.S. administration, with whom he has "strong links." "Abe gives regular off-the-record briefings to the press in a Tokyo hotel, and the press go off and bash North Korea. Public opinion is easily influenced in Japan, so it's a dangerous situation." Indeed, many of the members of the Koizumi administration seem comfortable with the Bush administration's aggressive foreign policy. Koizumi himself has ignored polls showing overwhelming public opposition to blanket support for U.S. military

moves made independent of UN approval. In a recent interview with one of the authors of this article for the London Independent newspaper, his defense secretary Ishiba Shigeru made this support explicit with respect to North Korea, saying the Bush gang's strategy toward Pyongyang was closer to his own than the approach of his predecessor Bill Clinton.

"Clinton's policy toward North Korea was based on two false premises: one, that Pyongyang would keep its promises (regarding the 1994 Framework Agreement); and two, that North Korea would collapse," he said. "North Korea neither kept its promises nor collapsed. We are now faced with the consequences." Ishiba has built his political reputation by pushing the limits on Japan's "peace constitution," including suggesting that Tokyo has the right to "defensively" attack North Korean missile sites.

The combined effect of all this is to demonize the Pyongyang regime and make consensual the view that threats, not negotiations, are the only thing that will break the deadlock and bring a solution to the kidnap issue. The alternative view – that the Pyongyang admission to the kidnappings and its willingness to negotiate nuclear issues and resolve the still unsettled issues of Japanese colonialism and the Korean War, are signs that the broken, reclusive but still proud state was coming in from the cold - gets less and less of a hearing.

"Japan seems determined to let emotional and hawkish sentiments dictate how the North Korean issue is resolved," says Gregory Clark. "And that's a very dangerous approach to take."

The abductees

Soga Hitomi was snatched as a 19-year-old from Niigata prefecture while walking home from a shopping trip with her mother in August 1978. While in North Korea, she married Charles Robert Jenkins, an alleged U.S. Army deserter, who still lives in Pyongyang with their two daughters.

Chimura Yasushi and Hamamoto Fukie were kidnapped, both aged 23, while on a date in Fukui on the Sea of Japan coast in July 1978. They married in North Korea and had a daughter and two sons, who have been told by Pyongyang that their parents are being detained in Japan.

Hasuike Kaoru and Okuda Yukiko were also kidnapped while on a date, in July 1978, and also left behind a teenage daughter and a 20-year-old son when they returned to Japan.

Also in Pyongyang: Kim Hye Gyong, the 15-year-old daughter of Yokota Megumi, who, at age 13, was the youngest of the kidnap victims when she was snatched in 1977. Pyongyang claims Megumi committed suicide while suffering from depression at a mental hospital in 1993. Her parents, Yokota Shigeru and Sakie, want to have their granddaughter repatriated to Japan.

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