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by David McNeill

The shell-shocked look on Takato Nahoko's face said it all. Just over a fortnight ago the shy volunteer aid worker became one of the most famous people in the world when harrowing footage of her and two other Japanese hostages with swords at their throats was broadcast by Arabic news channel al-Jazeera.

Their ordeal at the hands of Mujahedin rebels stunned a nation that had, until its involvement in Iraq, thought itself immune from such humiliations, and which shared Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro's visible relief when all were eventually released unharmed. The rebels had threatened to burn the hostages alive unless Japan withdrew its troops from the war-torn country.

But instead of returning to ticker tape parades and flag-waving crowds, the ex-hostages, including two more captured and released later, have been subjected to a relentless barrage of criticism that has sent them scurrying for cover and raised eyebrows in countries where such vitriol is normally reserved for the perpetrators, not the victims.

Ms. Takato, who bowed and cried her way through the media scrum at Narita International Airport on her return to Japan last week, has not been seen since. A message released through her family apologized for the "trouble" she had caused everyone. One magazine speculates she may have had a nervous breakdown.

The backlash, almost comic in its ferocity, has been led from the top. Mr. Koizumi, whose career hung precariously on the fate of the hostages following his controversial decision to lend Japanese troops to the US-led war effort in Iraq, has juggled relief with barely concealed anger in his pronouncements at what the five – all anti war – have put him through. "I'd like them to be more responsible and to consider the trouble they have caused others," he said in his first press conference after their release on April 15th.

When Ms. Takato and another of the ex-hostages, Koriyama Soichiro, announced last week they were prepared to go back to Iraq to continue their work, Mr. Koizumi expressed astonishment. "How can they say such a thing after so many people worked to secure their release," he said.

That counts as one of the more restrained comments coming from the ranks of Mr. Koizumi's ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), one of whose members this week called the returnees "anti-government, anti-Japan elements." Kashimura Takeaki said: "I have heard some of them openly expressed opposition to Japan's deployment of Self-Defense Forces (SDF) troops in Iraq. I cannot help feeling discomfort in...spending taxpayer money on such people."

To add to their misery, the Japanese Foreign Office is set to slap a bill for 2.37 million yen on the ex-hostages to cover expenses "incurred in their release," with the possibility of more on the way. Another minister, Nakagawa Shouichi mused on whether to charge their families for the use of government offices back home during the crisis. He said: "People who get lost in the mountains have to pay for their rescue."

The government is being cheered on by much of the conservative press, which has slammed the refusal of the former hostages to heed warnings to stay out of Iraq. Few seem aware of the irony that with most staff journalists staying out of the country, much of the newsgathering there is being left to freelancers like two of the former hostages.

As media commentator Philip Brasor put it in the Japan Times this week: "Having been traumatized once in Iraq, [the ex-hostages] were traumatized a second time by media and government officials wagging their fingers and saying, "Shame on You."

It was left to that champion of liberal causes, U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell, to defend the actions of the beleaguered five, who he said, should be commended for putting themselves at risk for the "greater good" and "a better purpose." The Japanese people should be "very proud that they have citizens like this that are willing to do that."

The sulfurous whiff of political revenge for anti-government comments by the hostages' families is hard to miss. Caught on the hop by the press pack as the plight of their loved-ones was beamed out of Iraq, the families gave emotional pleas for Mr. Koizumi to end his involvement in the US-led war. Ms. Takato's family was particularly vocal, leading protests and petitions calling for the SDF to come home. The other hostages, photojournalist Koriyama Soichiro, peace activists Imai Noriaki and Watanabe Nobutaka, and freelance journalist Yasuda Junpei, have all made it clear they are no friends of the government.

But the treatment of the returnees also reflects the very familiar growth of patriotic sentiment, of "supporting our boys" in a country that is divided from top to bottom by Japan's first dispatch of troops to a war zone since World War II. Egged on by the media, some members of the families were criticized for coming across as hectoring and "selfish" on TV, and within days, hate mail and threatening phone calls were flooding into their rescue center in central Tokyo. Letters to newspapers heaped vitriol on the families. "You should be more careful about what you say in front of the world's television cameras," said one. "Even if you don't like the troops being in Iraq, we have to be united."

A magazine dug up background on the apparent communist sympathies of the parents of 18-year-old Mr. Imai, who were criticized for letting their son go to one of the most dangerous places on earth. Some suggested that the families were politically motivated and wanted to topple the government. By the time they faced the foreign media for their first organized press conference, the families had learned their lesson. One after another, questions about their sympathies and their opinions about the government were fended off with curt "no comments." Mr. Imai's father stuck to the role of proud father rather than political activist: "Our son is old enough to make his own decisions. He just wants to being peace to the world."

The last two hostages released, Mr. Yasuda and Mr. Watanabe, in an interview with the foreign press, carefully repeated the mantra that that they were sorry for the "trouble" they had caused their country. Mr. Yasuda went on to say, however, that he did not feel in much danger in Iraq and that "local people have been compelled to take up arms to defend themselves." Mr. Watanabe said their captors made clear they were being held "because the Japanese government sent the Self-Defense Forces to Iraq." Both said they were released because they weren't carrying guns and speculated about what might have happened if they had been soldiers or mercenaries rather than activists.

When asked why he had risked his life by going to Iraq, Mr. Yasuda said: "I told myself I'm a journalist and I should take advantage of the situation."

Others have been less reserved. Nishimura Ayako, a peace campaigner and local councilor, is among many who are angry that the government has taken the credit for the release of the hostages. She said: "The only reason they were freed was because their captors knew they had nothing to do with the war. I think Mr. Koizumi was lucky. It could have been much worse for him, as you can see with the Italian case."

Undeterred and possibly emboldened, however, by the jarring serenade his country gave the returnees, and by the praise he received in some quarters for standing firm in the face of the threats of the hostage-takers, Mr. Koizumi has pledged to push ahead with further SDF dispatches to Iraq. His defense minister, Shigeru Ishiba, issued an order yesterday for another contingent of troops, despite criticism in the liberal press that the 550 jittery soldiers already in Iraq have spent much of their time holed up in their base in Samawah in the south of the country.

Meanwhile, the remaining hostages Mr. Koriyama and Mr. Imai, who have been diagnosed with acute stress disorder, have promised to speak to the press after they have recovered. But of Ms. Takato, there is no sign. "The mental anguish suffered by my sister is greater than expected," her brother Shuichi told Japanese TV. "It may be some time before she appears in public."

A version of this article appeared in the London Independent newspaper on April 28, 2004. David McNeill is a freelance writer and teacher living in Tokyo.

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