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The Slaying of Ito Kazuya: Japan in Afghanistan

Michael Penn

On the morning of August 26, 2008, aid worker Ito Kazuya arrived at work as usual. Four armed men suddenly appeared and abducted him. Local people witnessed the abduction, and a force of policemen and villagers gave chase into the mountains above north of the village of Bodyalai near Dara-e-Noor, Nangarhar Province, Afghanistan. The result was a tragedy: Ito was shot three times in the leg and once in the left thigh. On the morning following the abduction, his body was found by the local people: Ito had bled to death.

Ito was drawn to the strife-torn nation by a desire to "help restore Afghanistan to its rightful form, a country rich in greenery," he wrote in his application to join Peshawar-kai. A graduate of a Shizuoka agricultural junior college, Ito went to Afghanistan when he was 26. He seems to have been almost universally liked by those who met him. One of his classmates remembered Ito as a "warmhearted, honest man." The local Afghan villagers are said to have had affectionate feelings towards him as well. Children would gather around him calling "Kazuya! Kazuya!" One of his Afghan working colleagues recalled, "Ito never skimped his work." When news of his killing became known to the local people, one man commented: "For Afghans, this is shameful."

Ito Kazuya in Afghanistan in 2003

Ito had gone to Afghanistan as an agricultural specialist for the Peshawar-kai, a Fukuoka-based aid organization whose long experience in the region dates back to 1983. His main work was to identify and grow crops such as sweet potatoes, tea and hay that could take thrive in the barren Afghan soil that would thrive in the local area. This was part of the effort to reduce dependence on the poppies used to make opium and heroin and boost villagers' incomes. As one of his Afghan colleagues noted, "He wanted to expand legitimate agriculture." He also worked on constructing a twenty mile irrigation canal from the Kunar river to a desert area. By all accounts, Ito adapted very well to life in Afghanistan, gaining a working command of the Pashtun language and seeming comfortable in his surroundings. His Japanese friends began to think that Ito might spend the rest of his life in Afghanistan. That indeed became the case, although not in the sense they intended.

Why was Ito Kazuya Killed?

It may not ever be known with certainty why Ito was killed and what factors contributed to his tragedy. It seems that this was a botched effort to abduct him, not a premeditated murder. But there is a wider context to the slaying.

This year has seen a general deterioration of security in Afghanistan. The Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief, which coordinates NGO groups working in Afghanistan, reports that nineteen NGO workers were killed by Taliban militia forces and bandits between January and July, surpassing the total death toll in 2007.

Map showing Peshawar-kai projects in Afghanistan

Adil Shah, a suspect in Ito's kidnapping who was captured on site, reportedly told the Afghan intelligence service that militants in Pakistan asked his group to abduct a Japanese aid worker of Peshawar-kai, agreeing to pay a bounty of roughly US$13,200. The suspect said that the motive was to create a sense of political insecurity and to stop local aid projects from succeeding.

On August 31, Sayed Ansari, a spokesman for the Afghan intelligence service, pointed the finger of blame directly at Pakistan's powerful Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) when speaking to Kyodo News. In an interview, he claimed that the ISI "doesn't want the rehabilitation projects in Afghanistan. That is why by killing the engineers of such projects they want to stop them."

At this point it is difficult to verify such claims, but the general notion that certain militant groups in Pakistan -- official or unofficial -- are attempting to create difficulties for the regime in Kabul seems plausible as a motive for the kidnapping.

Another possible factor is that the Japanese government had been mulling a Self-Defense Forces (SDF) deployment to the Afghan interior in recent months. Although the plan for a Japanese military deployment was scrapped in mid-July, the prospect of such a mission was reported in the international media on several occasions. In early June, when it appeared likely that such a deployment would be authorized by the government, Dr. Nakamura Tetsu, the leader of the Peshawar-kai, told the media that if the SDF moved in, his aid organization would have to move out: "What the locals need are bread and water. Military activities will resolve nothing. Anti-Japanese sentiment will increase and we will not be able to protect our Japanese staff... The absence of Japanese troops in Afghanistan has helped local people trust Japan, leading to our safety. Sending the SDF amidst the worsening security situation would be foolish."

Peshawar-kai agricultural project in Dara-e-Noor: "Go where others dare not go. Do what others dare not do."

Did the talk of SDF deployment intensify animosity against Japan among militants, even though the plan was later abandoned? Was this a factor that led to a decision to abduct a Japanese aid worker? We cannot be sure. However, this seems to be part of what the Japan Communist Party was driving at in their party's statement on the Ito slaying:

> "War only kills innocent people and creates hatred. It is not a means by which terrorism can be eliminated. To bring peace to Afghanistan and to protect the security of NGO staff putting themselves on the line out there, we demand that methods be used other than military force, such as political and diplomatic solutions."

Ito's murder has led Japanese and other NGOs and aid organization to reassess their programs in Afghanistan. The Asahi Shinbun, for example, reported on August 29 that some support organizations were suspending or cutting back their activities in Afghanistan, while restricting the activities of personnel in that nation. Peshawar-kai secretary-general, Fukumoto Mitsuji, indicated that the group would pull back its remaining eight Japanese workers in Afghanistan.

The Association for Aid and Relief, Japan (AAR Japan), which offers education on how to avoid land mines, evacuated its two Japanese members from Afghanistan. The Basic Human Needs Association, which offers support in the telecommunications field, has scrapped plans to dispatch two Japanese engineers to Afghanistan in October. JICA on Tuesday ordered its two employees stationed in Jalalabad not to venture outdoors. Two other NGOs, JEN and Save the Children Japan, had already pulled out before the latest incident due to worsening security conditions. The Shanti Volunteer Association, however, said it would not pull out its worker in Afghanistan who has been engaged in school construction.

Ito Kazuya: the Pride of the Nation

Discussion of the political factors involved in the killing of Ito Kazuya should not be allowed to overshadow the story of this extraordinary man and his work. How many young Japanese—or Americans—are willing to leave their country and toil on behalf of a people of whom they know little? How many win over all with whom they associate, in any country, through their kindness and devotion? How many are willing to take such a physical risk for peace? Only thirty-one years old when he died, this young man leaves behind a legacy of commitment. Local Afghan villagers, whose respect and affection he earned, have pledged to carry on his work.

Dr. Nakamura Tetsu

On his June 2003 job application at Peshawar-kai, Ito explained that he had never even heard of a country called "Afghanistan" before September 11. However, when a lecturer described it as "a forgotten country," he was moved to learn more and to think about what he

could do to help. Ito wrote:

> "What I want is for Afghanistan to become a green and fertile country again. But this is not something that can be done in just two or three years. I believe that I can help the children's future by helping to ensure that they can live in an environment without food scarcity. I don't take this task lightly, as I am sure that the environment there is tough. But if you don't go out there and get on the ground itself, then you can't begin anything."

Ito Kazuyo was never given the chance to finish his work in Afghanistan, but he certainly did begin something. His father, Ito Masayuki, told the press: "I can say with confidence that Kazuya is our family's pride." It's easy to understand his father's sentiment. But a young man like this was more than his family's pride -- he was Japan's pride too.

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