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North Korea's Abduction of Japanese Citizens: The Centrality of Human Rights Violation

Michimi Muranushi*

When the families of Japanese people abducted by North Korea visited U.S. President George W. Bush at the White House, he expressed his sympathy. But did the president fully understand the complexity of this problem? In the final days of his presidency, when he decided to remove North Korea from the United States' list of so-called terrorist-sponsoring states, Bush promised that he would not forget the abduction problem. But did he realize how many people should not be forgotten? Does anyone know this number? Although the world has been aware of the abduction of Japanese citizens for the past several years, few of the details are certain.

The Issue

First, as of 2009, the Japanese government's official number of Japanese men and women who have been abducted by North Korea was seventeen.[1] These "recognized" cases are based on solid circumstantial

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evidence that the identified missing persons were either kidnapped on Japanese territory by North Korean agents and taken to North Korea by boat across the Sea of Japan, or they were lured into North Korea by North Korean agents and were not allowed to return. Most of these seventeen were kidnapped in the 1970s, on the order of none other than Kim Jong-il, the son of the then leader of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, although the country has never admitted it.

Second, a larger number of missing Japanese may have been, or are likely to have been, kidnapped. This number could be as high as one hundred and is growing. A private organization, the Investigative Commission for Missing Japanese,[2] has examined the cases of many missing Japanese and has concluded that some of them probably or possibly were abducted by North Korea.[3] The earliest case in this category was in the 1950s, and the latest case was as recent as the 1990s.

Has the Japanese government confirmed all the Japanese nationals now being held in North Korea? Of course not. Could the Japanese government add more people to the list of the "recognized" abduction victims? Yes, and recently it did. Some of the names on the

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[1] See Uhttp://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/n_korea/abduction/leaflet.pdfU, for example. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss what North Korea wanted to achieve by these abductions or how it carried them out.

[2] Its official name is the Investigation Commission on Missing Japanese Probably Related to North Korea (特定失踪者問題調査会). See Uhttp://www.chosa-ka.jp/indexeng.htmU.

[3] See Uhttp://www.listserver.sakura.ne.jp/cgi-bin/list/list3.cgi?mode=list2U.

Investigative Commission's list now are on the government's list as well. Has the commission identified all missing Japanese citizens who might be held in North Korea? Probably not. In this respect, this issue is very different from simply securing the freedom of known individuals. When two young American journalists were arrested on the Chinese–North Korean border and held in North Korea in 2009, the Americans knew who they were. In contrast, Japan has no definitive information about specifically whom the North Koreans have kidnapped or even whether they are still alive.

Third, the victims abducted from Japan are not necessarily Japanese citizens. For example, some Japanese Koreans who were lured into entering North Korea have not been permitted to return.[4] But people in this category are seldom mentioned, even in the Japanese media.

Fourth, many people are not regarded as victims of abduction, although they share some similarities. Since the 1950s, tens of thousands of Koreans in Japan have gone to North Korea, believing the North Korean propaganda that their motherland was a land of hope for them. Many of them also took their Japanese spouses with them. Most of these Koreans and their Japanese spouses now are living in this land of hope under discriminatory conditions and cannot come back to Japan.

Fifth, over time, many of the abductees in North Korea have

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[4] See Kang Chol Hwan, *Shuuyosho kokka Kita Chosen* (A farewell to the lageri state, North Korea) (Tokyo: The Masada, 1994), pp. 132–135.

married and had children and, by now, may have more relatives in North Korea than in Japan. Today would they choose Japan as their motherland or North Korea as their home? Would they be free to make this choice?

Sixth, whether the people in any of these categories are still alive is not clear. If North Korea admitted that it had abducted these people but denied that they still were alive, it would have to prove that they had died. Japan thus has good reason to doubt North Korea's statements about these people.

In sum, Japan knows what the problem is, but only North Korea knows the details. And Japan cannot go to North Korea in search of the truth.

Examples

The best-known of the seventeen abductees is Yokota Megumi, who was only twelve when she was kidnapped from a town on the Sea of Japan. She was walking home from school when she apparently encountered a North Korean agent. Later, another North Korean agent who defected to South Korea testified that he had seen her in a special school in North Korea.

Arimoto Keiko, twenty-three, was studying English in London. When she was looking for an interesting job, she was lured to North Korea by an agent in Britain. She is thought to have married another Japanese abductee, based on a letter that her husband risked handing to a Polish man who was traveling in North Korea, who then sent the

letter to his parents in Japan. The letter, written in Japanese, said that he and his wife were in North Korea and were well. An enclosed photo showed the couple and a baby.

One of the least-known cases identified by the Investigative Commission as a probable case of abduction is Tokunaga Yoichiro, an eighteen-year-old man who vanished from Japan in the early 1950s. A North Korean man who defected testified in the 2000s that he had seen Tokunaga in a prison camp in North Korea. He noticed a scar on the prisoner's shoulder and asked him how he got it. The North Korean said that the Japanese prisoner told him he got it in Hiroshima. His recollection corroborated with this missing person's personal information.

The Time Factor

Japan now is fighting against time. Beginning in the 1970s, more than ten years passed before people had found enough evidence to believe that the victims had probably been taken to North Korea. Then more years passed until the family members were able to obtain help and support from the Japanese Foreign Ministry and Japanese politicians, who had been reluctant to raise the issue for fear of disturbing the normalization of North Korean-Japanese relations. And even more time went by before the Japanese government began to try to discuss this problem with North Korea.

Finally North Korea admitted that five abducted Japanese were living in North Korea, four of whom were on Japan's list and one who

was not. In September 2002 when North Korea acknowledged that it had captured still others on Japan's list, but insisted that they had died, and declared that some of the rest had never entered North Korea under any circumstances.

Soon after this admission, the five Japanese and their family members in North Korea were allowed to return to Japan, although North Korea initially intended only to let them visit and not remain in Japan permanently. The five, however, refused to return to North Korea. After the two countries negotiated, North Korea agreed to let the family members in North Korea move to Japan as well. One of these family members was Charles Jenkins, a U.S. veteran of the Korean War who was thought to have defected to North Korea and married Soga Hitomi, the fifth victim that North Korea recognized and who was not on the Japanese list of abductees.

After all this time, North Korea still has not confirmed whether the people whom it insists have died are really no longer living. By now, the victims' families in Japan are old or have themselves died.

What Japan Should Do

The Japanese government often uses the term *solution* in regard to the abduction problem and states that its solution is a precondition for normalizing relations with North Korea. With so many unanswered questions about the problem, however, a solution is difficult to specify, and each of its many issues could cause a diplomatic nightmare for Japan.

To resolve this dilemma, the problem first should be defined. Are there really no abductees other than those that North Korea acknowledged in 2002? North Korea very likely kidnapped all seventeen of the people on Japan's list as well as many, if not all, those on the Investigative Commission's list. Second, North Korea needs to establish and disclose the abductees' current status. Are these people still alive? If they are not, North Korea must supply evidence that they are dead and the cause of their death. Third, the abductees' desires need to be ascertained. Do they still wish to return to Japan? They should be given freedom to decide either way, but it is doubtful that North Korea would accede to this. Fourth, although the North Koreans who actually abducted the Japanese should rightfully be handed over to the Japanese, this will never happen. Indeed, one of the known kidnappers has sometimes been seen at North Korean national ceremonies as an invited guest.

Japan's and North Korea's Interests

Before 2002, North Korea denied the abductions, but after 2002 when the five Japanese and their families had returned to Japan, it declared that the abduction issue had been settled. Japan and North Korea do not have normal diplomatic relations and probably will not until Japan stops raising the abduction issue. With normalization Japan would certainly proceed as it did when it resumed diplomatic relations with South Korea in 1965. At that time, Japan paid South Korea a huge sum of money, which effectively was compensation for Japan's occupation of

the Korean peninsula before the end of World War II. So, even though the abduction issue is obstructing the flow of money from Japan into North Korea, North Korea still is denying that the problem even exists. Indeed, North Korea could use this money to prop up its weak economy, in other words, to extend the life of the Kim dynasty disguised as a communist regime.

From this perspective, Japan's resolution of its abduction issue probably would have a global impact. Those who believe that the issue is small compared with North Korea's nuclear weapons should ask whether they would prefer a stronger North Korea prospering with Japanese money.

Disputes

As of 2009, Japan and North Korea are not discussing this issue, as North Korea is adamant that the abduction problem has been settled. Accordingly, this means, first, that North Korea does not acknowledge the seventeen Japanese abductees listed by the Japanese government or the probable cases of abduction listed by the Investigative Commission. Second, North Korea still maintains that some of the abductees died in North Korea, which was central to the dispute between the two countries for several years after 2002. North Korea, however, has failed to provide credible evidence of the victims' death. What it claims to be the remains of some of the victims—cremated twice at an extraordinarily high temperature, even though cremation is rare in this country—failed to pass the DNA test conducted by Japan

and did not convince the Japanese of its authenticity. Furthermore, the documents that North Korea offered to Japan regarding the "dead" victims were evidently forged, and its official accounts and proof of their "death" are not persuasive. For example, North Korea insisted that a young person with no history of heart disease had died of a heart attack. It also maintains that some of the victims' graves were washed away by floodwaters. Not only the initial crime but also the way that North Korea treated the so-called deaths of the Japanese abductees with such disrespect infuriated the Japanese public. Third, responding to Japan's request, North Korea agreed to "reinvestigate" the people on the Japanese government's list, but it did not commence its reinvestigation until after the Abe administration had left office, given its uncertainty about Japan's political future. Finally, no progress has been made on the abductions of Koreans from Japan and the Japanese spouses of repatriated Koreans.

Since 2002, when North Korea reversed its previous position of total denial, Japan has achieved little on the abduction issue. The following factors, however, may have some influence on North Korea. First, the abduction issue is reminiscent of North Korean terrorist acts in the past. One of the Japanese victims is Taguchi Yaeko, who was abducted in the 1970s. Kim Hyon Hui, an ex–North Korean agent who was sentenced to death by a South Korean court for the bombing of Korean Airlines flight 857 in 1987 but later was pardoned, revealed in the 1980s that Taguchi Yaeko was the same person as Lee Un Hae, the agent's official personal teacher of Japanese language and etiquette in

North Korea. This means that if Taguchi Yaeko were permitted to return, she could provide important information about North Korea's involvement in the bombing. Although North Korea admitted in 2002 that Taguchi Yaeko did enter North Korea, it claimed that there was no such person as Lee Un Hae and that Taguchi Yaeko had been killed in a traffic accident.

The release of Japanese abductees besides Taguchi Yaeko also might lead to the disclosure of secret information that North Korea is trying to hide, including information about other abduction victims. For the North Korean leadership to acknowledge North Korea's involvement in this crime, however, would cause a considerable loss of face. Many members of the Korean community in Japan already have withdrawn their support of North Korea, especially in 2002 when Kim Jong-il asserted that North Korean agents had decided on their own to kidnap Japanese and already had been punished.

North Korea may regard negotiations with the United States as more promising. The only time that North Korea revealed to Japan its part in the abduction issue was in 2002 when President George W. Bush made his infamous speech claiming the existence of an "axis of evil" made up of Iraq, Iran, and North Korea. At that time North Korea probably felt it necessary to make some concessions. But when the failure of Bush's Iraq policy became clear, North Korea's fear of the United States faded, and as a result, it regarded Japan's role as a go-between less important.

Perhaps not surprisingly, North Korea itself may not have full

information about the abductees. Indeed, even if they really have died, the government may not be able to provide accurate information about the circumstances, although this is a possibility that Japan does not wish to confirm.

The Nuclear Weapons Issue

North Korea's problems with the world are many, such as its development of nuclear weapons and missiles, refugees, concentration camps, famine, export of illegal drugs, and forgery of foreign currencies. Ironically, this multitude of problems has given the country a bizarre advantage. North Korea's development of nuclear weapons has eclipsed even its gross violations of human rights. Although the six-party talks have succeeded in bringing North Korea to the international negotiating table, they also have diverted the world's attention from the lack of justice inside this prison state.

In fact, the six-party talks may enable North Korea to control its position vis-à-vis the rest of the world. That is, North Korea has been able to enhance its global position by manipulating its policy on nuclear weapons. Without making any progress in human rights, including the abduction of Japanese citizens, North Korea has succeeded in being removed from the U.S. list of terrorist-sponsoring states. By denying any connection to the bombing of the Korean Airlines plane in 1987 and to the bombing of Yangon (Rangoon) in 1983, it also was able to reverse its status as a terrorist state.

If the other members of the six-party talks reward North Korea

for its seeming "progress" in nuclear matters, Japan may be left out in the cold. In short, the six-party talks have oversimplified North Korea's problems in return for the chance to hold discussions with North Korea. In this way, North Korea gains time and opportunities for direct talks with the United States about guarantees of its own security.

Accordingly, in this current framework, the United States and Japan's neighbors first may ask Japan to soften its economic sanctions against North Korea in return for "progress" on nuclear weapons issues. Second, the United States may decide to negotiate directly with North Korea, which could lead to its normalizing relations with North Korea. Then other nations could follow suit in the hope of achieving stability in East Asia, and Japan may be asked to normalize its relations with North Korea without having made any progress on the abduction issue.

The current stagnation could last for more than ten years, at which time Japan's support for the abductees probably would decline with the aging or death of the victims' family members and also of the abductees themselves.

Steps to Resolve Japan's Abduction Problem

First, the attention of the United Nations and individual nations to North Korea's human rights problem should not waver and should be kept separate from their attention to military matters. North Korea must understand that a discussion of nuclear weapons issues does not

mean that its human rights disaster will be tolerated.

Even if North Korea's nuclear weapons issue is resolved to the satisfaction of the United States and other interested parties, other issues, especially human rights, would remain. Any reward given to North Korea for its military cooperation should be limited so as not to let North Korea's leaders think that the rest of the world is satisfied with its behavior.

Human rights in North Korea need to be discussed in a separate forum, and the talks should be based on a UN resolution, so that North Korea could not dismiss them as interference in its internal affairs. North Korea's willingness to help Japan resolve the abduction problem also would signal its willingness to improve its human rights.

Japan should ask the United States for cooperation on the abduction issue on the basis of U.S.-Japan Security Treaty, just as the United States asked Japan for cooperation on its Iraq policy on the basis of the two countries' alliance. The admission of the crime and the release of some of abductees in 2002 probably were a result of President Bush's apparent willingness to defy what the United States regards as a rogue state. Accordingly, if the United States regarded the disclosure of information about the Japanese abductees as a precondition for better relations with the United States, North Korea might be forced to divulge more details. This would be a reasonable precondition if the United States reconfirmed human rights as a fundamental value of diplomatic relations.

Japan also should ask, with the United States' support, China

and Russia to be more sensitive to North Korea's violations of human rights. If China decided to recognize the North Korean escapees to its country as refugees, the change in Chinese policy would send an important message to North Korea. Japan and the United States then should reward China for its reversal of policy.

Japan should request, as well, South Korea's cooperation on abduction issue. Although South Korea itself has about five hundred abductees in North Korea, the problem has been linked to the issue of separated families. But whereas the problem of abduction is a peacetime crime by North Korea, the problem of separated families is a wartime crime by North Korea committed during the Korean War.

In short, Japan's success in the issue of its abductees depends on its influence on North Korea's, Japan's, and third countries' tripartite relations to break the deadlock in North Korean- Japanese bilateral relations.

Conclusion

North Korea has gained nothing by kidnapping Japanese citizens, but it has thus far escaped any serious punishment, except that it has been denied Japan's compensatory funds. Although North Korea is poor, it nonetheless is clever, manipulating the world with its outsized military ventures. And although Japan is rich, it has no effective means of bringing justice to North Korea and repatriating its Japanese nationals.

Japanese political discourse insists on a solution to this complex

problem, but it has not even specifically defined what this solution would entail. Japan thus needs the active cooperation of the world's other major powers to resolve this problem, not only for the abductees and their families but also for the vast silent majority of North Koreans. Even though nuclear weapons may appear to crowd out such a seemingly small-scale issue as the abduction of Japanese citizens, the world should also recognize the centrality of this issue to the rest of the problems with North Korea. If Japan should abandon this issue, North Korea with Japanese money will be able to build even higher walls around its numerous prison camps. That is, the world should see the abduction issue as a way by which the outside world can demand that North Korea start attending to the human rights of its own people.

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