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Marking 20th Anniversary of Movements to Rescue Abductees

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Two decades have passed since the Association of the Families of Victims Kidnapped by North Korea (AFVKN) and the National Association for the Rescue of Japanese Kidnapped by North Korea (NARKN) launched movements to rescue Japanese citizens kidnapped by North Korea. Four decades have passed since the first of identified Japanese abductees were kidnapped. However, only five of the 17 identified have been rescued. In addition to these identified abductees, there are most surely more Japanese citizens who have been kidnapped by North Korea. The total number of Japanese abductees remains unknown. Why is the situation so miserable regarding the North Korean abduction?

Why has Japan failed to rescue abductees?

The biggest reason is Japan's failure to act. The abductions of Japanese citizens by North Korea concentrated in a period between the late 1970s and the early 1980s. Japanese police identified radios used by North Korean spy boats and picked up radio signals to check North Korean agents' entry into and escape from Japan. Based on radio information and other evidence, Japanese police suspected that frequent incidents in which Japanese citizens went missing in coastal areas in 1977 and 1978 could be attributable to abductions by North Korean agents. However, police then refrained from publishing such suspicion.

After Japanese abductees were found to have been used for a bombing of a Korean Airlines plane in 1987, the then chairman of Japan's National Public Safety Commission in 1988 made a historic parliamentary statement that North Korea was deeply suspected to have abducted Japanese citizens. However, major mass media failed to report the statement. Two years later, Shin Kanemaru of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party and Makoto Tanabe of the Japan Socialist Party led a group of Japanese lawmakers to visit Pyongyang and met with then North Korean President Kim Il Sung, while failing to discuss the abduction issue. Only once at official talks between Japan and North Korea on the normalization of their relations, the Japanese Foreign Ministry took up Ms. Yaeko Taguchi, who was suspected to have been kidnapped by North Korea.

I then became the first Japanese scholar to contribute a report to a monthly magazine on the abduction. The report was thoroughly ignored and I was asked if I worried about my safety. I also received anonymous extortion letters.

There was an unusual taboo about North Korea then.

The AFVKN broke the taboo. In 1997, South Korean authorities provided information alleging North Korea's abduction of Megumi Yokota. Her parents seriously worried that their daughter could be killed if her real name and photographs were published. They eventually chose to appeal to public opinion about the North Korean abduction. In response to the choice, families of other abductees joined to establish the AFVKN. I and other volunteers created the NARKN. The two associations have cooperated in movements to rescue the abductees for the two decades.

In five years after the movements were launched, then Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi made a historic visit to North Korea. At his talks with Koizumi in which the abduction issue was the major topic, then North Korean leader Kim Jong Il admitted some of the abductions, leading to the return of five abductees to Japan. However, the Japanese Foreign Ministry had given priority to the normalization of bilateral relations rather than the rescue of all Japanese abductees, failing to take advantage of the opportunity to rescue all.

What should we do now?

In order to resolve the abduction issue, Japan should give top priority to the rescue of all Japanese abductees and exert pressure on Pyongyang to approach Japan. We had urged the Japanese government since 1997 to set up a division in charge of the abduction issue. In 2006, the government met the request by appointing a state minister in charge of the issue and creating a relevant task force. We had asked the government since 2003 to impose sanctions on North Korea for the abduction. The government met the request last year by invoking almost all possible sanctions under present law on North Korea, while specifying the abduction as one of the reasons.

At a time when the international community including the United States is pounding strong pressure on North Korea's Kim Jong Un regime that has recklessly continued nuclear and missile tests, we are urging the Japanese government to "give top priority to the abduction issue and rescue all abductees within this year" and "launch substantive talks with Pyongyang for the return of the abductees in exchange for the termination of Japan's exclusive sanctions." The abductees are waiting for help. We must do everything possible to rescue them.

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