



Japan-DPRK: Seeking a Solution

by Ralph A. Cossa

Shame on Pyongyang . . . and shame on Tokyo too!

My heart goes out to the five Japanese citizens currently "visiting" Japan for the first time since being abducted by North Korean agents in the 1970s and 1980s. For decades, they had been forcibly separated from family and loved ones, with Pyongyang refusing even to admit their existence. Now, they are being forcibly separated from their own children, who had to be left behind in Pyongyang as a precondition to their being allowed to conduct what was to have been a one or two week visit home.

I am by no means equating Pyongyang's original act of kidnapping these five innocents (and at least eight others who have since died) with Tokyo's current refusal, in response to the demands of their families and the Japanese public in general, to send them back. But, Tokyo's well-intentioned actions notwithstanding, the same victims who for so long were unable to see their parents now cannot see their children. This is an unacceptable trade-off. As a parent, I deeply sympathize with the trauma these people must now be experiencing.

Neither Pyongyang nor Tokyo seems willing to give an inch in the current standoff over the abductees' fate. Tokyo want the children sent to Japan so that the abductees will then be free to choose for themselves where they want to live. Pyongyang rejects this demand, insisting that they return (as Tokyo promised when the visit was arranged), while providing hollow assurances that they will then be allowed to return to Japan with their families if they choose to do so. Tokyo rightfully remains suspicious of this approach, freedom of choice and keeping one's promises not being among the attributes for which North Korea is famous.

There is a solution to this stand-off, however: Ulaanbaatar! I would call on the government of Mongolia - which enjoys diplomatic relations with both North Korea and Japan and is more likely than any other neighboring state to be seen as an honest broker - to invite Tokyo to send the abductees to Ulaanbaatar while asking Pyongyang to send the children there as well.

(If Mongolia is not interested or for some reason is considered unacceptable, there are other options, including Vladivostok in the Russian Far East or any of a dozen Chinese cities. Alternatively, we would be delighted to host them in Honolulu, except the lure of Hawaii's palm trees and temperate climate may convince them to abandon both options and remain in Paradise instead.)

Once on neutral ground, the victims and their immediate families - with other relatives, members of the press, and diplomats all excluded - can discuss their options privately in a safe, secure setting with each deciding for him or herself which

option to choose: return to the DPRK or go to Japan. Both governments would have to agree in advance to respect their individual wishes.

There is one other complicating factor. The five abductees are comprised of two sets of married couples and a fifth woman, Hitomi Soga, who is currently married to Charles Jenkins, an ex-GI who apparently defected to North Korea in 1965 and is listed by the U.S. Army as a deserter. He faces arrest if he comes to Japan. Tokyo has requested that he be pardoned, but Washington has thus far refused. Forcing Mrs. Jenkins to choose between continued "virtual imprisonment" for herself and her children in Pyongyang and the prospects of real imprisonment for her husband if her family chooses to come to Japan is another unacceptable trade-off for one who has already suffered so much. Shame on Washington if it forces her to make that choice. Should she choose, under those circumstances, to keep her family together in North Korea, everyone in Japan will no doubt blame Washington, even if other factors may have driven the final decision.

Let me add one postscript to the opening sentence: ". . . and shame on Seoul as well!" The unofficial (but near unanimous) response to this stand-off among South Koreans seems to be "why are the Japanese making such a fuss over a dozen or so people?" Implied, and often stated, is the follow-on, "especially given the terrible things Japan did to millions of Koreans during the colonial era." The fact that this period ended more than half a century ago has done little to diminish Korean anguish.

But, beyond this bitter sentiment lies a begrudging admiration for Tokyo for sticking to its guns and demanding an accounting of the fate of its citizens, especially in light of Seoul's refusal to come to grips with its own abductee problem. Officially, close to 500 ROK citizens are listed as having been kidnapped by North Korea; unofficially, the number is believed to be more than 10 times higher. Japan's success in obtaining a confession and apology from Pyongyang has given new life to associations of South Korean relatives of missing persons, who are demanding that Seoul take up the issue more forcefully with Pyongyang.

The current ROK government has been hesitant to do this, with a Unification Ministry official recently stating: "We understand the families' concerns, but there are many issues to deal with and we must focus first on areas where we can cooperate." Not surprisingly, this is unacceptable to the families. It only adds to the complaints of many South Koreans who feel that the current engagement policy with the North, while well-intended and preferable to a confrontational approach, has become too soft and too one-sided. Perhaps Seoul could learn something by studying Tokyo's initial approach to this issue.

Meanwhile, one can only hope that Tokyo and Pyongyang can put politics aside and find a compromise solution, such as

allowing the families to reunite on neutral territory. Such a solution is consistent with each side's assertion that the abductees should be free to make their decision without undue influence. This proposal tests the sincerity of such assertions. It also allows Japan and North Korea to defuse what has become the most emotional roadblock to future dialogue (which was the apparent objective of Kim Jong-il's confession and willingness to let the abductees visit Japan), even though other aspects of the issue - - the how and why behind the deaths of the other acknowledged abductees and the possibility of 50-60 more kidnap victims - are yet to be resolved. Most importantly, it will allow the abductees, for the first time in decades, to truly exercise their free choice in determining their respective fates.

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