

Submarine collision provokes anger and anti-US sentiment in Japan

James Conachy
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The February 9 collision of the US nuclear submarine *Greeneville* with the Japanese fishing vessel *Ehime Maru* off the coast of Hawaii has produced an outpouring of outrage and anti-American sentiment in Japan. Nine people died because of the incident, including four 17-year-old boys. Their bodies are believed to be trapped within the ship's hull, 610 metres (2,000 feet) beneath the Pacific Ocean.

Each day this week the Japanese media has highlighted the grief of those who lost loved ones and the attempted cover-up by the US Navy of how the tragedy occurred.

The US Navy initially denied that the presence of 16 civilians in the submarine's control room, including wealthy and influential individuals with ties to the oil industry, contributed to the accident. It was then revealed that two civilians were seated at the submarine's controls as it launched into a rapid surfacing technique known as an "emergency blow". It is widely believed that, far from the action being a training exercise as claimed, it was a demonstration staged for the benefit of the well-connected guests.

For days, the US Navy was not forthcoming as to how the high-tech submarine could have failed to detect a 499-tonne ship. Then on February 20, the US National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) revealed that the *Greeneville's* sonar had in fact found the Japanese trawler and four other ships at least 70 minutes before the collision. Navigation charts, however, were not updated before the submarine surfaced and struck the *Ehime Maru*, because the civilians were blocking access to the controls.

Of the three sailors operating the sonar equipment, one was an unqualified trainee. The sailor chiefly responsible for updating the navigation chart has told the NTSB that he did not ask the civilians to make way so he could do his work. It is now believed that the submarine commander had no idea of the sonar results, as they were not reported to him. Moreover, the sonar monitor in his compartment was broken.

These revelations come on top of the fact the *Greeneville* surfaced outside of the designated testing area for submarines and that it provided no assistance to those on board the sinking ship. The US Navy did not attempt to locate the hull of the vessel for six days even though the accident happened just miles from the massive Pearl Harbor US naval base. By

comparison, the Russian navy took a day to begin a search to locate the submarine *Kursk* last year.

The families and friends of those killed have responded bitterly to the litany of obfuscations and half-truths. The port of origin of the *Ehime Maru*, the fishing town of Uwajima in the Ehime prefecture, has been the scene of furious denunciations of the US, publicised across Japan by the major media outlets.

Ryosuke Terata, the father of one of the teenagers, told *Asahi Shimbun*: "It is an unforgivable, intentional mistake. We will continue to hold anger and other indescribable emotions toward the United States."

Teruo Terata, the uncle of the boy, said: "At first they said it was training and then they said it was a demonstration. The US military is giving out information on a piecemeal basis, but I think they knew about everything, including the problems with the sonar, from the beginning. I have to suspect that they were trying to conceal the truth about the accident."

The US regional Consul-General, dispatched to Uwajima by the Bush administration to apologise, was met with a demand by the provincial government for a "full disclosure of information". Regional newspapers have insisted that the Japanese government put no trust in US investigations into the collision or as to whether the hull of the *Ehime Maru* can be recovered.

Some national tabloid newspapers have given vent to a conspiracy theory circulating in Japan that the sinking was a deliberate act of revenge by the US Navy for the bombing of Pearl Harbor 60 years ago.

The *Japan Weekly Post* published a lengthy diatribe on February 19, linking the collision with crimes committed by US servicemen on Okinawa and quoting unnamed government officials speculating about a Pearl Harbor motive. The journal declared: "A series of misconduct perpetrated by US soldiers is threatening the Japanese nation... The Japanese government should make a strong claim against the US government. Worrying about the possible deterioration of relations with the US is not the way that the world thinks".

Resentment toward the US military had already been building in Japan, following a series of recent incidents on the island of Okinawa, where 25,000 US servicemen are based. Last year a US marine allegedly attempted to rape a schoolgirl. In January,

a marine photographed another young girl raising her dress, while another was arrested for the rape of a local snack bar operator. In February, a marine was indicted for arson attacks on houses.

The US commander on Okinawa, Lieutenant General Earl Hailston, was recently forced to apologise to local authorities after an e-mail he wrote to his subordinates came to light. In the message, he described the Governor of Okinawa as a “wimp” over the handling of one of the incidents in January. Last week a town assembly in Chatan, just north of the Okinawan capital Naha, called for Hailston's resignation and demanded that all US marines be removed from the island.

Mori under pressure to resign

The Japanese government has come under unprecedented public and media pressure to make strident criticisms of the US over the incident.

The mass daily *Asahi Shimbun* editorialised last week: “We cannot help asking whether security must come at the expense of people's lives.” Even the conservative *Yomiuri Shimbun*, a bedrock defender of Japan's military alliance with the US, declared that the regulations governing US troops stationed in Japan needed to be reviewed in order to placate public opinion.

Already under fire over other issues, Japanese Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori has been heavily criticised for his response on being informed of the collision. To the disgust of many people, he continued playing golf for over two hours.

Reflecting public sentiment, a legislator from the New Komeito party, which is in coalition with Mori's Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), told parliament: “It is truly unfortunate that Prime Minister Mori did not immediately call President Bush, who is the leader of the US military, and tell him to make the utmost efforts. A phone call to President Bush might have been able to save those who suffered”.

In an effort to patch up his position, Mori declared the revelations that civilians hindered the sonar operations as “deplorable”. Chief Cabinet Secretary Yasuo Fukuda described it as “a serious problem” and said Japan “would have to take appropriate measures if that is in fact the case”. Defence Minister Toshitsugu Saito denounced as “outrageous” the news that civilians were at the sub's controls.

On February 21, Mori cancelled a proposed March 3 summit meeting with Bush, ostensibly due to pressing demands involving the Japanese budget. No new date has been set and the Japanese government has formally requested that the US send a special envoy to Tokyo to fully explain the causes of the collision.

But it appears that Mori's response to the tragedy has effectively sealed his political fate. His personal approval rating has plunged to just 9 percent in the regular *Asahi Shimbun* poll—one of the lowest levels ever recorded by a Japanese leader. Another television poll registered only 5.4 percent support for the Mori government and 82.4 percent disapproval.

With the government facing a potential disaster in upper

house elections scheduled for July, the submarine collision has galvanised the governing parties to act to remove Mori. Both the LDP's coalition partners have withdrawn support for his prime ministership and at least two leading factional figures within the LDP are positioning themselves to replace him. Mori is expected to resign by the end of March, if not sooner.

While the anger of the families of those who died on the *Ehime Maru*, the populace on Okinawa and among broader layers of the population stems from genuine sentiment in Japan against the contempt displayed by the US military, it is being exploited to further the cause of the more nationalist layers of the Japanese political establishment.

Right-wing demagogues such as the Liberal Party's Ichiro Ozawa and Tokyo governor Shintaro Ishihara oppose the US-Japan security alliance because it is based on the pacifist constitution that ensured Japan was militarily dependent upon the US. Ishihara attacks the US military presence on Japanese territory as an insult to Japanese national pride. Advancing a similar nationalist outlook, the Communist Party of Japan is committed to ending “Japan's subordinate relationship with US imperialism”. These political tendencies are expected to register gains in the coming election.

The Bush administration has displayed a combination of perplexity and panic at the backlash in Japan. Since the accident, Bush, Secretary of State Colin Powell and Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld have issued multiple formal apologies—in sharp contrast, for example, to the US response following the bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in 1999 during NATO's onslaught on Yugoslavia.

Retiring US ambassador to Japan Thomas Foley used his final state visit to Emperor Akihito to make another apology on February 20. Several days earlier he had complained: “I don't know how the US government and the people of the US can more adequately express their regrets and deepest apologies.”

The sinking of the *Ehime Maru* may yet prove to be a turning point in US-Japanese relations. The strategic orientation in Asia mapped out by Republican think-tanks and Bush advisors envisaged close US-Japanese military collaboration, particularly against China. Within a month of taking office, the administration is confronted with a situation where the political forces gaining ground in Japan are those calling for a downgrading of the US-Japanese military alliance, not its strengthening.



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