

Japanese government shaken by Iraq hostage crisis

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The abduction of three Japanese citizens in Iraq, who were released unharmed yesterday, has created the biggest political crisis for the Koizumi government since it came to power in 2001. It could well lead to electoral defeats for the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) in by-elections on April 25 and the July upper house elections.

Millions of Japanese hold Koizumi responsible for the situation. In defiance of overwhelming anti-war and anti-militarist sentiment in Japan, his government has given political, financial and military support to the illegal US invasion and occupation of Iraq. In December and January, 600 Japanese troops were deployed to occupy the strategic southern Iraqi city of Samawah.

The hostage drama began on April 8. The three Japanese, Noriaki Imai, Nahoko Takato and Soichiro Koriyama, left Jordan the day before and were travelling to Baghdad by taxi. They were abducted in southern Iraq by a group calling itself the Saraya al-Mujahideen (Mujahideen Brigade) and were believed to have been held near the besieged city of Fallujah.

Noriaki Imai, 18, is a member of the Campaign to Abolish Depleted Uranium. He arrived in Iraq on April 1 with plans to study the impact of DU on children in Iraq's poorest areas. Nahoko Takato is a 34-year-old aid worker and peace activist who was on her third trip to Iraq to help homeless children in Baghdad. Soichiro Koriyama is a 32-year-old former soldier and had gone to Iraq as a freelance photojournalist to provide material for the Japanese magazine *Weekly Asahi*.

The Mujahideen Brigade released a video to *Al Jazeera* showing the three surrounded by four masked armed men and in a distressed state. The video statement declared that the hostages would be burnt alive, unless the Japanese government agreed to withdraw its troops within three days.

The Mujahideen Brigade is not linked to the Mehdi Army militia led by Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr. In response to the hostage taking, Amer al-Husseini, a senior aide to al-Sadr, told journalists on April 9: "We condemn such acts and we pray for their release."

The possibility that three innocent people would die due to Koizumi's policies caused widespread outrage. The majority of the population remained opposed to the war on Iraq. Some 500,000 people in hundreds of Japanese cities demonstrated on March 20 against the participation of Japanese troops and demanding their withdrawal. In a survey published the same day by *Asahi Shimbun*, 66 percent of respondents declared the US had no legitimate reason to attack Iraq.

Demonstrations and vigils began as soon as news of the hostages reached Japan. Hundreds of people rallied in Tokyo near the cabinet office and the parliament. The protesters carried banners which read "Bring them home now, Koizumi", "Why don't you go to Iraq instead of the three hostages?" and "Don't lend our hand to the Iraqi occupation."

The families of the hostages flew to Tokyo to urge the government to secure their safe release. The mother of Soichiro Koriyama told a press conference: "I really feel that (in Koizumi's view) the state comes before the human rights of the three now confined. I have no words to describe how I feel."

This week, the families presented the government with a petition with 150,000 signatures demanding the government withdraw Japanese troops from Iraq.

Throughout the crisis, however, Koizumi refused to meet with the families. Instead, the Japanese government repeatedly stated it would not bow to "terrorism." During US Vice President Dick Cheney's visit to Tokyo over the weekend, which was used primarily to shore up Japanese support for the occupation of Iraq, Koizumi said Tokyo believed in Washington's "good intentions."

In contrast, hundreds of Japanese sent messages, which were published by *Al Jazeera* in Arabic, appealing to the kidnappers and denouncing the occupation of Iraq. One message read: "I understand the anger of the Iraqi people towards our government, which is working as a war dog for the US aggression. But why must a peace activist, Imai, be punished in place of the Prime Minister Koizumi and other

hawkish sycophants?”

Japan's smaller opposition parties, the Social Democratic Party (SDP) and the Japanese Communist Party, issued calls for an immediate troop pullout.

Keiko Yamauchi, an SDP candidate in the July upper house elections, told the *Asia Times*: “Koizumi is always talking about fighting terror, but what about the thousands of Iraqis who have died under US occupation? Isn't that also terror? Japan has renounced war and we should have no part in this killing. Our troops should be withdrawn at once, before we get sucked down further in this disaster, along with the Americans.”

Japan's main opposition party, the Democratic Party, publicly blamed Koizumi for the crisis, but lined up with the government's stance on not withdrawing Japanese troops.

DPJ leader Naoto Kan told the *Yomiuri Shimbun*: “Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi bears a major responsibility for the incident, but at this moment, the DPJ is ready to transcend the interests of the ruling and opposition parties to rescue the abducted Japanese.”

A breakthrough was made on the weekend, not because of the stance of the Japanese government, but because of the efforts of *Al Jazeera* to publicise the widespread opposition in Japan to the occupation, and due to the intervention of a leading Sunni clerical organisation.

Al Jazeera published a statement on Sunday from the Mujahideen Brigade that it would release the three Japanese due to requests by the Islamic Clerics Association, a group of Sunni religious scholars.

Association spokesman Haarith al-Thari told reporters the organisation had issued a religious decree insisting the Mujahideen Brigade free the hostages. He stated: “We hope that Japanese people will press their government to retreat from their policy which supports the aggression and occupation of Iraq.”

The three Japanese were handed over to the association yesterday. Takashi Imai, the father of 18-year-old hostage Noriaki Imai, thanked the Japanese people at a press conference and declared: “I also want to say thank you to the people of Iraq for having saved my son's life despite their hardship.”

As they were released, however, unconfirmed reports overnight indicate that two more Japanese have been taken hostage in Iraq. The two are believed to be Junpei Yasuda, a 30-year-old freelance journalist, and Nobutaka Watanabe, a 36-year-old member of a non-government organisation.

Throughout the past week, the Koizumi government has pushed the lie that the purpose of the Japanese deployment to Iraq is to help the Iraqi people. Chief cabinet secretary Yasuo Fukuda told reporters: “Our forces are carrying out humanitarian and reconstruction assistance... There is no

reason for a pullout.”

However, a government white paper released on Tuesday testifies to one of the real motives for Japan's support for the US-led invasion—staking a claim on Iraq's energy resources.

On April 14, the *Asahi Shimbun* published a report on the white paper entitled “Iraq aid key to oil supplies.” The newspaper commented: “In reference to Iraq, the report said restoring stability was indispensable to securing stable energy supplies to ensure the prosperity of Japan, which is dependent on oil exports from the Middle East.”

Japanese corporations are already seeking the rights to develop the one billion-barrel Al Gharaf oil field in southern Iraq. Japanese involvement dates back to the late 1980s when Iraq was one of Japan's main suppliers of oil and Japan was one of Iraq's largest trading partners. The Al Gharaf oil field is located just 60 kilometres due east of Samawah, where the Japanese troops are based.

Sections of the Japanese establishment have longer-term motives as well. For more than a decade, factions of the LDP have agitated for the repudiation of the pacifist Article 9 of Japan's constitution, which prohibits Japan using military force except for self-defense. It is viewed as an unacceptable obstacle to Japan aggressively asserting its economic and strategic influence in the Asian region and internationally.

Over the past two years, Koizumi has gone further than any previous Japanese government in reviving Japan as a military power. Support for the Bush administration's “war on terror” was used to justify military involvement, first in the war on Afghanistan and then, the occupation of Iraq. His government has stated its intention to hold a referendum on revising the constitution sometime over the next few years.

The hostage crisis has brought to the surface once again the immense social and political tensions wracking Japan. Hostility to Japan's involvement in Iraq has compounded the general alienation and antagonism toward the LDP, generated by a decade of economic stagnation, declining living standards and record levels of unemployment.

Like the Spanish election last month, the coming Japanese ballots are shaping up as a referendum on Koizumi's militarist agenda that could produce a massive backlash against the LDP.



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