

Former US soldier arrives in Japan

# Charles Jenkins: a pawn on the international chessboard

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On July 18, Charles Jenkins, the 64-year-old former US Army sergeant alleged to have defected to North Korea in 1965, arrived in Tokyo for medical treatment of an undisclosed abdominal ailment. Just a week earlier, he and two North Korean-born daughters reunited with his Japanese wife, Hitomi Soga, 45, in Jakarta, Indonesia, after 21 months of saber rattling and deliberations between the Japanese and North Korean governments.

While his story remains a relatively minor one in the United States, it has made almost daily headlines in Japan and not for insignificant reasons. Jenkins is the husband of one of some 13 Japanese citizens abducted by North Korean agents in the 1970s and 80s—an allegation the North Korean government has acknowledged—to instruct operatives in Japanese language and customs. Jenkins is also a deserter according to the US Army and faces the possibility of extradition, court martial, and incarceration. Japan is seeking clemency in his case.

Jenkins, who lived in Stalinist North Korea for the past 39 years, is a native of the small farming town of Rich Square, North Carolina. The son of a poor working-class family, he joined the US Army in 1955 at the age of 15 and, in the course of a decade, eventually found himself serving with the 8th Cavalry in South Korea. In 1965, at 24, he headed a four-man patrol unit near the De-Militarized Zone (DMZ) situated on the 38th parallel that divides the two Koreas. Around 2 a.m. on January 5 of that year, he was separated from his unit to investigate a strange noise and suddenly disappeared. From statements made by his wife, Jenkins crossed over to avoid action in the Vietnam War.

Becoming a resident of North Korea, then presided over by Soviet-installed strongman Kim Il Sung, Jenkins worked as an English teacher, appeared in party-sanctioned films like *Nameless Heroes, Chapter 20* as caricatured American villains, and later encountered Hitomi Soga whom he married in Pyongyang in August 1980. Only two years earlier, Soga and her mother had been spirited away from Sado Island, located off the coast of Niigata Prefecture on the Sea of Japan, to North Korea. The North Korean government, however, denies that the mother was abducted. Jenkins and Soga's daughters, Mika, 21, and Belinda, 19, have studied as English language majors at Pyongyang University of Foreign Studies.

In October 2002, following Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi's unprecedented September 17 meeting with present North Korean leader Kim Jong Il, Soga and four other surviving abductees were repatriated for a 10-day visitation period in Japan. Shortly thereafter, the Koizumi government insisted that it was under no obligation to return the five individuals. Meanwhile, several loved

ones remained in North Korea. Following Koizumi's second visit on May 22 this year, arrangements were made for all family members to leave for Japan. Jenkins' case is the most prominent to date, as he was successfully given permission to reunite with his wife.

The events surrounding Jenkins' alleged defection in 1965 remain unclear. Apart from his wife's testimony, he has made no public statements that serve to illumine his case. In a November 2002 interview with the Japanese weekly magazine *Shukan Kinyobi*, he regurgitated obligatory panegyrics to the North Korean leader—such praise being required of all who live under the Kim family cult in the retrograde Stalinist state.

Interestingly, there is no indication in Jenkins' service record that he would abscond from the military. Moreover, the choice to defect to North Korea to avoid the war in Vietnam is beclouded by the fact that he was reportedly in the United States several weeks before he disappeared from South Korea—making Canada and Mexico more plausible destinations for defection.

For all intents and purposes, Jenkins was a model soldier. Yet, the Department of Defense and US Army claim that he voluntarily abandoned his duties, leaving four departure letters in his barracks locker. On their *In Support of Charles Robert Jenkins* website, Jenkins' American relatives deny these allegations, referring to communications from US Army Military Police Operations, which informed nephew James Hyman that the purported letters are missing.

The US Army has, nonetheless, charged Jenkins with desertion. He is also reported to have made propagandistic broadcasts from North Korea on January 29, February 17, and March 10, 1965. For this he faces the possibility of two counts of solicitation or encouraging other soldiers to desert, one count of aiding the enemy, and four counts of bringing discredit upon the US Armed Forces. That he is in Japan does not grant him immunity from these charges.

Under the Status of Forces Agreement, Japan is legally bound to facilitate Jenkins' extradition. State Department spokesman Richard Boucher and the American Ambassador to Japan, Howard H. Baker, Jr., have confirmed that the United States will pursue the case against the 64-year-old when his health conditions improve. If apprehended by US authorities, Jenkins shall undergo court martial in accordance with Section 885 Article 85 (desertion) of the Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ). While the UCMJ stipulates a death sentence for wartime desertion, a court martial may direct other forms of punishment, which can include imprisonment.

A general misconception persists that Jenkins is covered by a 40-year statute of limitations for military desertion, and that he could

be exonerated by next spring. US officials in Asia, however, have confirmed that the former Army sergeant is not covered and remains under military jurisdiction.

The Koizumi administration is pressing for a pardon or some form of “special consideration” with respect to Jenkins’ deserter status. However, the motives for this apparent exercise in humanitarianism are underscored by the cynical and desperate workings of the ruling Japanese Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). Principally, these machinations have sought to cosmetically enhance the image of the capitalist party whose right-wing cabinet has a current disapproval rating at a record high of 44 percent.

Consequently, Koizumi has attempted to capitalize on the formerly abducted Hitomi Soga who is now a celebrity in Japan, and whose anguish has become a collective, national phenomenon. In a July 16 article entitled “Soga Reunion an Election Ploy” on the internet daily *Japan Today*, an LDP insider explained that Koizumi’s priority on the Jenkins case was to arrange for a family reunion before the Upper House election on July 11—with the ostensible purpose of swaying the electorate through the emotionally charged abduction-repatriation issue and, apparently, to give the impression of a compassionate and righteous LDP.

Although the Jenkins case was never going to be a major factor in the Upper House election, the prime minister, with his own popularity plummeting, was looking for any electoral assistance. During their May 22 meeting, he discussed the issue with North Korean leader Kim Jong Il, who suggested that Jenkins and his daughters meet with Soga in Beijing. But Jenkins’ wife was fearful of flying to China because of its close ties with North Korea and the possibility that she could be dispatched to Pyongyang. Thus Indonesia, which has no extradition treaty with the US, was chosen instead.

A nine-day reunion took place on July 9, but failed to turn the electoral tide for the LDP. While Koizumi had hoped to secure a modest 51 seats, the party won only 49 of the 121 seats up for reelection in the 242-seat Upper House. Chief Cabinet Secretary Hiroyuki Hosada described the outcome as “a very severe verdict”. The main reasons for the poor result were public outrage over the government’s changes to the Japanese pension system and its deployment of Self Defense Forces in Iraq.

In all of this, one cannot but detect elements of orchestration and collusion on the part of the Koizumi and Kim Jong Il governments. Jenkins, wife, and daughters are now all on Japanese soil.

Precisely what North Korea has to gain from the Jenkins affair and related machinations flows directly from the deep economic problems that have beset the regime for the past decade. Like other Stalinist states, its autarkic program of “socialism in one country,” dressed up in the ultra-nationalist *Juche* (self-reliance) ideology, has been completely undermined by the development of globalized production processes.

North Korea has been reduced to an impoverished debtor nation with a crumbling infrastructure and hungry, malnourished population by the collapse of its major economic benefactor, the Soviet Union, an ongoing US economic blockade, and a series of calamitous floods and droughts. Throughout the decade, particularly with the advent of the Bush administration, it has confronted an aggressive campaign aimed at ensuring its complete compliance with US demands, backed by the implied threat of precipitating its collapse.

Kim Jong Il is desperate for economic assistance and to exploit any opportunity to open up a split between Washington and its main East Asian allies—Japan and South Korea. Accordingly, North Korea has

apologized for and acceded to Koizumi’s demands on the entire abduction issue. The government is also promising to hand over four of the last remaining members of the terrorist Japanese Red Army Faction who carried out Japan’s first airline hijacking in 1970. The late Kim Il Sung had granted the nine original perpetrators political asylum in North Korea.

What is at stake was indicated by an unnamed source at Japan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, quoted in the aforementioned *Japan Today* article: “Out of concerns that his support from the military might decline, Kim Jong Il has become increasingly dependent on economic aid from Japan. Kim realizes that if the Koizumi government were to fall, he would have to start from scratch building up ties with a new prime minister, which is time he can’t afford.”

Despite Jenkins’ arrival and hospitalization in Tokyo and the publicity surrounding his family, Japanese officials such as Kyoko Nakayama, the Koizumi cabinet’s special councilor for the abduction issue; Seiken Sugiura, deputy chief cabinet secretary who is representing the abductees’ families; and Shigeo Iizuka, vice chairman of the families’ group, have expressed uncertainty about his prospects. Iizuka, for one, is noted to have said that the Jenkins case is really in American hands.

Some US officials hope that Jenkins may possess information concerning the alleged nuclear weapons program in North Korea. But it is clear that he is something of a diplomatic thorn for the US administration, coinciding as his case does with the campaign for the November presidential election. In addition, Japan has committed its Self Defense Forces to the occupation of Iraq. Therefore, the US government is treading cautiously on the Jenkins affair, lest it upset relations with Japan, precipitate possible troop pullout, and complicate the neo-colonial aspirations of American imperialism.

Whatever the outcome of his case, Charles Jenkins has found himself in the grip of complex political forces. This aged and frail man, who may or may not have deserted to North Korea nearly 40 years ago, has become a pawn on the international chessboard, and, as events have shown, the last consideration of its players is any sense of compassion, whether for him or his family.



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