

Ransom deadline passes for Japanese hostages held by ISIS

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The deadline for Japan to pay \$200 million to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in exchange for two Japanese hostages passed Friday afternoon at 2:50 p.m. Tokyo time, with no word as to the fate of the two men. ISIS had given Tokyo 72 hours to pay the ransom.

The ransom ISIS demanded for the lives of Kenji Goto and Haruna Yukawa was the same amount Abe had recently promised to countries backing the United States's renewed military campaign in the Middle East.

In a Friday press conference, Japan's Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga said Tokyo had heard nothing from ISIS. He claimed, "We are exploring every possibility available to save their lives."

Abe made clear, however, that Japan would not pay the ransom, which he called an "unacceptable act of terrorism." He said, "I strongly demand [the hostage-takers] not to harm the two Japanese and immediately release them. Japan will cooperate with the international community and further contribute to peace and stability in the region. This policy is unshakable and we won't change it."

Yukawa and Goto were abducted in August and October, respectively. Yukawa, a troubled man who had gone bankrupt and lost his wife to cancer, saw himself as a military contractor. Goto had been a full-time war correspondent since 1996. The two met in Syria last April and Yukawa requested Goto's help in entering Iraq. Goto agreed, saying Yukawa was "hapless and didn't know what he was doing. He needed someone with experience to help him."

Yukawa returned to Syria in July and Goto went home to Japan. When news of Yukawa's kidnapping reached Goto, the reporter returned to the Middle East to help his friend, leading to his own kidnapping. In a plea for her son's life on Friday, Goto's mother said, "Kenji always has been a kind person ever since he was

little. He was always saying, 'I want to save the lives of children in war zones.'"

In November, Goto's family received an e-mail demanding a \$10 million ransom. The Japanese government was aware of this, but it was not made public.

Since then, Tokyo has not opened channels of communication with ISIS, but rather cut them off, blocking attempts to negotiate a settlement averting the deaths of the hostages.

Efforts to free Yukawa were reportedly underway last October, a few weeks before Goto arrived in Syria. According to journalist Kosuke Tsuneoka, a convert to Islam who had previously met ISIS leaders, the group contacted him and invited him to serve as a mediator at a trial in which Yukawa was accused of being a spy. Japanese Muslim scholar Hassan Ko Nakata was also asked to serve as an interpreter.

Tsuneoka hoped to use this to intercede for Yukawa. However, a day before the two could leave Japan, Tsuneoka's home was raided by police, who seized the two men's passports. Since then, neither man has been in contact with ISIS, nor has the Japanese government contacted them despite their offers of help.

Tsuneoka said, "I am fully open to helping the Foreign Ministry engage in discussions with ISIS if the Japanese authorities allow me to."

The broader strategy pursued by the Abe government is not to seek peace or negotiations, but to back escalating US military operations in the Middle East in order to remove step by step all restrictions on aggressive use of Japan's military, the Self-Defense Forces (SDF).

Last summer, Abe's cabinet approved a reinterpretation of Japan's post-World War II constitution, allowing for "collective self-defense." Its

purpose was to do an end run around Article 9, in which Japan formally renounced the sovereign right to wage war. The change allows Tokyo to send its military abroad in wars of aggression so long as it is done in coordination with an ally, such as the United States.

The last hostage crisis involving Japan in the Muslim world—the 2013 tragedy in which 37 hostages were killed at a gas complex at In Amines, Algeria, including 10 Japanese—was also exploited to justify revising the law to allow for stepped-up Japanese military activity.

Abe said at the time, “To force troops, who must make life or death decisions in a split second, to act within the limits of the law or risk violating it, is a harsh restriction. But we have no intention of using [the hostage deaths] to try to pass such a revision to the law.”

However, this is exactly what Abe did. In April 2013, the cabinet approved a bill in response to the Algerian situation allowing the SDF to transport Japanese nationals overland in the event of an emergency. While the law was presented as necessary for the SDF to carry out rescue missions, it in fact allowed the Japanese military to enter conflict zones so long as the dangers were “fully considered,” meaning Japanese soldiers could fight overseas so long as the pretext of a rescue mission existed. The bill passed the Diet (Japanese parliament) in November of that year.

For the Abe government, the current hostage situation serves primarily as an opportunity to pass more laws removing restrictions on Japan’s military, despite widespread public opposition, and boost Japanese imperialism’s influence in the oil-rich Middle East.

In promoting these laws, one of which would allow the prime minister to dispatch the SDF overseas without parliamentary approval, Abe said they would allow Japan to take part in mine sweeping operations in the Strait of Hormuz to aid the US war effort in the Middle East.

Japan is deeply dependent on the Middle East, which provides 83 percent of Japan’s imported oil, or half of the country’s energy needs. However, ties with the countries in the region are not strong; the last prime minister to visit Egypt was Abe, in 2007, during his first term in office. Junichiro Koizumi last visited Jordan, Israel, and Palestine in 2006.

Abe was on a six-day tour of the Middle East when

the video of Goto and Yukawa was released. In Egypt, the first leg of his tour, Abe pledged \$2.5 billion in aid to the region. Abe also promised \$200 million in “non-military” aid to countries fighting ISIS, claiming it would be used for infrastructure and aid for refugees. Abe then met with Jordanian King Abdullah in Amman before meeting Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in Israel.

After the ISIS video surfaced on Tuesday, Abe met with Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas before cutting his trip short and returning to Japan.

Abe is hoping to expand Tokyo’s influence in the region. In 2013, he pledged \$2.2 billion to the region, similar to the amount he promised on his latest trip. The Japanese prime minister has traveled throughout Asia and Latin America, promising aid and investment to various energy-rich nations along the way. His goal is not only to gain much needed raw materials for the resource-poor Japanese economy, but also to attempt to undermine the influence of China, the main target of attempts to revive Japanese militarism.



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