

Japan's defense minister resigns in wake of scandal

Ben McGrath
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Japanese Defense Minister Tomomi Inada resigned Friday, ostensibly for her role in the cover-up of Ground Self-Defense Force (GSDF) documents damaging to the Abe government's militarist agenda. Her departure is an attempt to prevent further falls in public support for the government and Abe's plans to force through pro-war constitutional revisions by 2020.

The cover-up involved daily logs that revealed Japanese troops participating in a so-called peacekeeping operation in South Sudan were at risk of being pulled into a military conflict in July 2016. One of the five legal requirements for the Japanese military to take part in such a mission is that a ceasefire agreement be in place, a condition that the GSDF daily logs clearly showed had been violated.

Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga painted Inada's resignation as an attempt to take responsibility for the cover-up, rather than being forced out in a planned cabinet reshuffle on August 3. Suga apologized for the scandal as well and claimed the government "will work hard to win back the public's trust."

A close ally of the prime minister, Inada is known for her nationalist and militarist views and regular visits to the Yasukuni Shrine, a symbol of Japanese militarism. The shrine is where those who died in Japan's wars, primarily World War II, are symbolically interred, including 14 class-A war criminals.

Inada has largely been a liability during her tenure in office. She was appointed defense minister last August as Abe pushed his cabinet even further to the right. A Jiji news agency survey earlier this month found support for Abe's cabinet had fallen to 29.9 percent, with many people citing a lack of trust in the government.

At a press conference yesterday, Inada revealed more behind her decision to step down. She stated: "Not only

has the log controversy highlighted inappropriate handling of information disclosure, but the fact that there were numerous instances of what appeared to be information leakage from within our organization [that] has risked eroding public trust in our governance system."

In other words, her de facto removal is not so much due to her role in a cover-up, but in allowing it to go public.

The scandal began last September when journalist Yujin Fuse made an information disclosure request to see the GSDF daily logs from South Sudan for July, the month fighting broke out between government and rebel troops. The Japanese soldiers were taking part in the United Nations Mission in the Republic of South Sudan (UNMISS), supposedly aiding construction projects in the oil-rich, African country.

The government initially claimed in December that the logs had been discarded, but then announced on February 7 that a wider search had uncovered the documents in digital form at the Joint Staff office, which oversees the GSDF, the Air SDF, and Maritime SDF, the formal names for Japan's military branches.

The logs contained reports such as, "Fierce gun fighting at five, six o'clock (reference to direction) of the camp," and "Fierce fighting involving tanks and trench mortars." They also contained a map of the GSDF camp and a red area adjacent with the words, "Fighting broke out."

In total, 300 people were killed in the conflict and 36,000 were displaced in July last year. Abe's government pulled the GSDF troops out of South Sudan in May, but denied that the decision was related to unstable military conditions.

At the time of the fighting, the government downplayed what was happening in South Sudan. On

top of securing access to oil and minerals, the Sudan deployment provided Abe's government with the pretext for employing its new security legislation that allows SDF troops to take part in battles alongside allied countries, ostensibly by coming to their defense. Last November, the cabinet formally authorized the SDF to operate under the laws, which were passed in September 2015 and enacted the following March.

By March this year, however, Japan's state-run broadcaster NHK reported that the GSDF also had digital copies of the logs and had met in February to decide what to do with them, opting to delete them in order to preserve the lie that only the Joint Staff had the documents.

Defense Minister Inada appeared before the Diet's Lower House Security Committee that month to point fingers at GSDF figures for the cover-up and claimed to have no knowledge of what had transpired. She assigned the in-house Inspector General's Office of Legal Compliance to investigate.

This month, however, it was revealed that Inada had been present at the meeting in February and was well aware that the digital logs existed and were being deleted. Yet the Inspector General's Office cleared Inada of wrong-doing.

That whitewash became untenable on July 25. Fuji News Network reported that it had a two-page memo from an anonymous senior Defense Ministry official, showing that Inada had been present at a February 13 meeting to discuss the cover-up. It quoted a conversation between Inada and Lieutenant General Goro Yuasa, who reportedly said: "We have only confirmed we don't have the paper (version of the log). But (electronic) data does exist."

Inada responded, according to the note, by asking: "What should I say in answering [questions] tomorrow?" Two days after that meeting, Inada allegedly endorsed the decision to prevent the public from learning that the GSDF also had retained the daily logs, leading to their deletion.

Only weeks ago, Prime Minister Abe rejected calls for Inada's dismissal after she angered voters by urging them to back the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) candidate in the Tokyo Metropolitan Assembly elections in order to "support" the SDF. The opposition to her comments reflected broader anti-war sentiment in Japan and hostility to the Abe government's agenda

of remilitarization.

The main opposition Democratic Party (DP), sensing an opportunity to score political points, attacked Inada on July 19, saying she "has repeatedly given false responses in the Diet and it is very egregious." It called on Abe to dismiss her.

The DP, whose support rating has fallen to single digits, is not opposed to remilitarization, but instead is posturing as a defender of the current constitution in order to win electoral support. In fact, the party's proposed alternatives to Abe's 2015 security legislation were nearly mirror copies, with only minor cosmetic changes added.

The leaks from within the Defense Ministry reveal an internal conflict over how to push forward with the remilitarization plans in the face of popular opposition. Sections of the ruling LDP have been critical of Abe's proposed revisions to the constitution, demanding he adopt an even more right-wing, pro-war position. This includes Shigeru Ishiba who is considering challenging Abe for the LDP presidency in next year's leadership vote.



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