

Keynote Speech by the Minister of State for the Abduction Issue

At the International Symposium
On Human Rights Violations including Abductions by North Korea

Tuesday, May 5, 2015
(New York)

Thank you very much, Ambassador Bird.

I would first like to express my appreciation to Ambassador Bird for chairing this Symposium, as well as to Special Rapporteur Marzuki Darusman, the ambassadors of the respective countries, and all of you for attending. On behalf of the Government of Japan, I welcome you and extend our gratitude. We are also grateful for the cooperation we have received from all of the parties concerned.

The Commission of Inquiry, COI, on Human Rights in the DPRK compiled and published a report last year based on the testimony of more than 80 (eighty) people at public hearings and in over 240 (two hundred and forty) closed-door interviews. North Korea categorically refused to cooperate with the investigation. This report revealed the serious human rights situation in North Korea and raised concerns in the international community, prompting it to take action to improve the situation and resolve the problems.

The Government of Japan, together with other countries, supported the establishment of the COI and provided information and other assistance in compiling the report. On behalf of the Government of Japan, as well as a person who has been engaged in this process from my previous position as Chairperson of the Headquarters for North Korean Abductions of the Liberal Democratic Party of Japan, I would again like to express my deep appreciation for the efforts of the members of the COI, namely; Justice Michael Donald Kirby as Chair, Ms. Sonja Biserko, and Special Rapporteur Marzuki Darusman.

The international community has taken the COI report seriously and has given a proactive response. The UN Human Rights Council and the UN General Assembly have adopted a series of resolutions on this issue. Discussions were held at the Security Council's Arria Formula meeting and during the Human Rights Council's Universal Periodic Review. Japan and other countries have held various related meetings and events.

At the end of last year, the Security Council finally placed the "Situation in the DPRK" on its agenda, and North Korean human rights issues were officially discussed for the first time in that forum. At the March meeting of the UN Human Rights Council, the Resolution on the Situation of Human Rights in the DPRK was adopted in light of the Special Rapporteur's report, which includes draft strategies concerning international abductions, enforced disappearances and related matters.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Government of Japan greatly appreciates these efforts by the international community and earnestly hopes that these initiatives will improve the situation and resolve the human rights issues in North Korea. We are committed to maintaining and further strengthening the momentum. This symposium is part of that commitment.

At the same time, much remains for the international community to do, including following up the COI report as well as the UN resolutions based on said report. The Government of Japan appreciates the decision by the Government of the Republic of Korea to accept the establishment of the field-based structure. We expect that this structure will begin operating promptly and that it will enable monitoring the human rights situation in North Korea in greater detail. Discussions need to continue at the UN Security Council. We are also committed to contributing to deepening the discussions in close collaboration with the international community.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The COI report states that human rights violations by North Korea are unprecedented anywhere in the world, in the sense that they are systemically conducted as policies of a state.

The abduction of foreign nationals is among North Korea's most serious human rights violations. These abductions have been organized by North Korean authorities and carried out on a large scale. The COI report raises suspicion that North Korean authorities have not only abducted foreign nationals from South Korea and Japan, but also from other Asian and European countries. The forcible abduction of innocent people is a serious breach of sovereignty, not merely a human rights issue, and is tantamount to terrorism.

Today, we have invited a family member of a Japanese abductee to tell his story as an example of the large-scale organized crimes North Korea has committed against multiple countries. Mr. Takuya Yokota is a younger brother of Ms. Megumi Yokota, who was abducted at the age of 13 by a North Korean agent on her way home from school in 1977. At that time, she was junior high school student. Megumi's mother looked everywhere for her, sometimes together with Takuya, who was still very young. According to a former North Korean agent, Megumi was locked up alone in the tiny, lightless hold of a spy boat and screamed "Mommy, help me, save me!!" over and over but in vain for help, while scratching ceaselessly on the iron walls. When she arrived at the unknown coast of North Korea, all of her finger nails had peeled off.

In 2002, North Korea for the first time admitted to its abduction of Japanese citizens, which it had long denied. However, it has failed to sufficiently explain or account for the fate and safety of all of the abductees, except for a handful who were able to return to Japan. In addition to the 17 (seventeen) Japanese abductees already identified by the Government of Japan, there are currently 880 (eight hundred and eighty) persons for whom the possibility of abduction by North Korea cannot be ruled out. Information gathering and investigation activities have been conducted for them. Today, we also have invited Ms. Misa Morimoto, a younger sister of Ms. Miho Yamamoto, as a family member of one of these persons.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Last year, the Government of Japan consulted with North Korea in order to comprehensively resolve various issues between the two sides based on the Pyongyang Declaration. In July, North Korea established the Special Investigation Committee and commenced investigating all Japanese nationals in North Korea, including victims of abduction. Under the strong leadership of Japanese Prime Minister, Mr. Shinzo Abe, who has treated this issue with the utmost gravity, a door that had been closed for years has opened.

However, we have so far received no concrete report on the results of the investigation from North Korea. Considering that the family members of the abductees are aging, and that the abductees themselves have been awaiting rescue for so many years, the inexorable passage of time is unbearable. The Government of Japan strongly demands that North Korea promptly and honestly report the results of its investigation and that it ensure both the safety of and return of all Japanese abductees as soon as possible. North Korea will have no future unless it resolves the abduction issue.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The leadership of North Korea must take both serious and specific actions towards the resolution of its human rights issues by making the right decisions from a broader and more humanitarian perspective. Only by doing this, will North Korea be able to take the first step towards achieving harmony with other countries.

The international community must not cease its efforts to resolve human rights violations in North Korea. I will close my remarks by stressing my hope that this Symposium will serve as a step forward in achieving our common goals.

Thank you very much for your kind attention.