

▶ For Abductee's Immediate Return!

North Korean Human Rights Abuses

Awareness Week Essay Contest2017

Awarded Essay



Junior High School Category

First Prize

Ai Katabe

“Human Rights Issue of the Entire International Society”

At the UN General Assembly held in New York on September 19, Japanese people paid close attention to a statement made by U.S. President Donald Trump. He made strong criticism about the North Korean abduction of a Japanese girl, who was just 13 years old at the time. While North Korea’s ambassador left the chamber in protest, Japan overwhelmingly welcomed the remark, highlighting a major significance in Trump’s statement at a time of serious turmoil in international society. The case is now acknowledged as a serious case of human rights violation, but it all began some 40 years ago.

Since 1977, a number of Japanese people disappeared into thin air. After 20 years of complete disappearance, reports began to surface about the sighting of Japanese persons in North Korea. The government asked North Korea to investigate, but Pyongyang refused to admit any abduction, and did not even agree to official negotiations. It was not until 2002, when North Korea admitted having kidnapped Japanese nationals and apologized in a summit meeting with Japan. Yet, only five people were returned to Japan, and the rest of the abductees were treated as either having become deceased or having never entered North Korea. The hopes of victims’ families were dashed. Since then, many families continue to wait for the return of their loved ones in sorrow.

One of the unreturned abductees is Megumi Yokota, aged 13 at the time of abduction. She was kidnapped and taken to North Korea all alone, having had her life as an ordinary junior high school student suddenly destroyed. I could not even imagine the level of terror, desperation and sadness she has suffered.

Have you heard of a “Blue Ribbon” badge? The blue represents the color of the Sea of Japan and blue skies. The badge has been developed as part of a campaign to demand the return of all the remaining abductees. It symbolizes their families’ conviction that they are still alive and will be rescued one day. North Korea’s nuclear program and missile launch issue are drawing attention away from the abductions issue. The blue ribbon badge is appealing to us that we should never forget about those abductees who continue to suffer in North Korea.

There are activities on North Korean abductions issue in place across the nation, in addition to the Blue Ribbon campaign. Public education activities, radio broadcasts, etc. are undertaken not only by the government but also by private organizations. For junior high school students like myself, it is not easy to take part in these activities. Yet, we can take a small but significant step toward resolution of this issue. That “step” is to become more interested in the abductions issue. Some may say it is too insignificant a step to take. However, becoming interested in this issue can transform the way we behave in daily life. For example, when you hear about President Trump’s aforementioned statement, you become inspired by it and bring it up when talking with friends, rather than simply thinking, “so what?” I know that is what happens, because that is how I responded. I want as many people to become interested in the abductions issue as possible and communicate it to other people. I sincerely hope that this essay will spark an interest in this case among as many people as possible.

Junior High school Category

Second prize

Yume Tanaka

“Wishing for the Earliest Rescue of Abductees”

A girl about the same age as myself was kidnapped and abruptly taken to an unfamiliar country all by herself. Watching the animation “Megumi” made me realize the true horror of the North Korean abductions issue, which I had only heard of or read about in news or newspapers.

I belong to my school’s tennis club and practice every day. Similarly, Megumi was enjoying a fulfilling time every day as a member of her school’s badminton club. If the kidnapping had not taken place, she would have led a happy life, working toward her dream with support from her family and friends, like I do today. Her life was turned upside down when she was abducted by North Korean agents. I could not even imagine how much fear, sadness, suffering and frustration she must have gone through.

The incident also ruined the lives of her family, still waiting for her return in Japan.

The other day, I read a newspaper article about the Citizens’ Rally on rescuing all the abductees. What left a strong impression was Megumi’s brother’s statement that “the issue must be resolved early so that the activities of the Association of the Families of Victims Kidnapped by North Korea would not have to be carried forward to next generations.” As many as 17 Japanese people are confirmed to have been kidnapped by North Korea. After learning that there are many Japanese people who have suffered the same suffering as Megumi and her family for the last 40 years, I have come to feel that North Korea’s abductions of fellow Japanese people are an outrageous act that should never be forgiven.

The Japanese government has engaged in negotiations with the North Korean government, demanding the return of all abductees, and managed to bring five of them back to Japan. However, the situation is far from a full resolution. Even if all the victims of North Korea’s kidnapping should be rescued, they would never regain the time lost while in North Korea.

In this sense, this issue would never be fully resolved in a true sense. Yet, North Korea must identify all the abductees and return them all to Japan.

To this end, each and every Japanese citizen must gain firm understanding about this

dreadful case of human rights violation, and join the call on North Korea to allow all the victims to return to Japan.

What I can do as a Japanese citizen is to learn and understand, in greater depth, more about the North Korean abductions issue at school and other avenues, to never forget the fact that there are still some Japanese abductees trapped in North Korea, and to spread the word about this tragic issue to as many people as possible, so as to achieve the return of all the victims back to Japan.

Junior High School Category

Second Prize

Kenshin Sasaki

“Safeguarding Happy Life”

Humans are born to live in search for happiness. I want to attain happiness through doing what I enjoy and fulfilling various responsibilities.

Needless to say, living a happy life is a right granted equally to all people. There is absolutely nothing that would justify criminal acts that deprive people of this right to happiness. North Korean abductions of Japanese nationals are an example of such crime. Abduction issue is, indeed, an act of human rights violation.

There are different forms of human rights violation in our world. Yet, the North Korean abductions have completely deprived abductees of their precious dreams and life they had hoped to lead in a single act of cruelty. It is something that must never be forgiven, and something we must continue to work on for full resolution.

My dream is to become a teacher. If, in the process of working toward my dream, I became snatched away abruptly, substantially distorting my vision for life, I think I would consider taking my own life. Considering the fact that there are still some Japanese people abducted and living a difficult life in North Korea, all of us who live in Japan must unite and take action. The first step we can take would be to watch the animated short film, “Megumi.” One of the victims, Megumi Yokota, was abducted when she was just 13. She was an energetic and earnest girl leading a normal life until the unfathomable act of North Korean abduction destroyed everything. Her parents fought for her return for 40 long years. The abductions also destroyed the lives of the rest of the family members. It is a crime of serious gravity.

I am 14 years old now, a year older than when Megumi was kidnapped. I cannot even imagine what it would be like to be snatched away like that at an age younger than me. Yet, watching the anime made me really realize it was something that actually happened. It evoked anger about the abduction, and a sense of urgency that something must be done to bring all the victims back to Japan.

That made me think what I can do about this issue. Firstly, I will talk to my family and friends about the North Korean abductions. Some of them might show little interest, but deepening their understanding, even by a small amount, should contribute to bringing

about changes. U.S. President Donald Trump referred to this issue at the UN General Assembly. This is an international issue. In order to help other people develop a greater interest, I will become involved in various activities and enhance my understanding of current situations. I might not be able change anything by myself, but I would like to live in a way that contributes to resolving this issue.

The North Korean abductions issue is, by no means, the only human rights issue in the world. Yet, having learned about this issue has made me want to strongly build a world where everyone can live a happy life with a smile on their face.

High School Category

First Prize

Shota Hanayama

“First Step toward Resolving the North Korean Abductions Issue”

“Lest we forget.” This is the wish of the families of people abducted by North Korea.

I watched the DVD “Megumi,” which deals with the North Korean abductions of Japanese nationals. The portrayal of Shigeru and Sakie Yokota, the parents of the abductee Megumi Yokota, running energetic street campaigns to resolve the abductions issue with help from numerous people, conveyed their strong determination to bring their daughter back to Japan. At the same time, the short movie depicted the sense of concerns among victims’ families about time idly passing by without seeing a resolution to the issue.

I also read a newspaper article titled, “A Letter to Megumi.” I became overwhelmed with emotions when I read a comment by Megumi’s parents, saying “Come back to Japan so that we can have a new family portrait taken.” Megumi’s father, Shigeru, had a photograph taken with Megumi, wearing her junior high school uniform, 40 years ago. In the winter of the same year, Megumi was kidnapped by North Korean agents. The letter described the parents’ passionate desire to want to bring Megumi back to Japan and live as a family once again in Japan.

The North Korean abductions issue is Japan’s national issue. Each and every Japanese citizen must take an interest in the issue, and build up a public opinion to appeal the need for its solution to parties in and outside the nation. That is because, unless the entire population sees this issue as a priority, North Korea might underestimate Japan’s resolve to bring back all abductees in future negotiations.

Becoming interested in the abduction issue is about becoming aware of, and empathizing with, the suffering of abductees and their families. Do we afford similar awareness and empathy for people around us? If not, how can we possibly do so for these victims who live far away?

On reflection, I feel I could have made more effort to notice when my friends around me need some help, and actually offered such help.

I want to boost my level of interest in the abductions issue. To do so, I must become more interested in people around me. I am surrounded by people with various disabilities at the special needs school I attend. I want to increase my sensitivity toward the needs of

those people, e.g. what wishes they have, what kind of life they want to lead, and what types of support they need in what situations. That will lead to enhancing my interest in the abductees and their families.

I plan to talk about the abductions issue in the one-minute speech we do every day in the morning gathering. That will increase my own interest in the issue, and help others around me gain their interest at the same time.

Resolving the abductions issue requires the buildup of small initiatives like this by individual persons. I am determined to initiate whatever actions I could take, however small they may be.

High School Category

Second Prize

Yuuka Yamazaki

“What I Can Do to Keep Concern of the Abduction Issue”

I wonder where Megumi Yokota and other victims of North Korean abductions are, and what they are thinking today.

When Megumi was kidnapped at the age of 13, I was not even born yet. All I knew was that a person called Megumi Yokota was abducted, without fully understanding or even trying to learn what “abduction” meant. Watching the animation “Megumi” has opened my eyes to the current situation and cruel facts about the North Korean abductions of Japanese nationals.

Forty years have passed since Megumi’s abduction. One of the harshest facts in this case is the amount of suffering the abductee and her family must be feeling for not being able to see each other. Yet, what must be worse is their anxiety about seeing the rest of society forgetting the issue and concerns that full resolution to this issue is going further and further away. We must never forget the fact that some Japanese people were abducted by North Korea, and are still seeking help there. Above all else, we must educate ourselves more about this issue.

The first step toward resolving the abductions issue is to keep the concern of this issue alive. To this end, it is necessary to let more people know about it. Yet, it is human nature to forget things as time lapses. Media attention also shifts to other incidents that emerge one after another. That is why the government and mass media must work together in maintaining exposure about issues that should never be forgotten. The government is sensitive about public opinions. We must tell the government that us Japanese citizens are interested in the abductions issue and want to see it fully resolved. There are frequent media coverages on the Northern Territories dispute because of strong public interest.

Just as I only learned about the details of the abductions issue after watching the anime, today’s senior high school students have only heard of the issue but do not know many details. I want more and more people to watch this animation, “Megumi,” to deepen their understanding. It should be incorporated into elementary, junior high and senior high school education across the nation to inform all students about the situation. I am also committed to spreading information about it to as many people as possible. My SNS post

about having watched “Megumi” on SNS met with a response saying, “What is that?” The government should consider using YouTube and SNS to reach a greater number of people.

There is a limit to what an individual person could achieve. What I can do is to never forget about this issue, and spread words about it. I owe it to this competition to have learned about the issue. I sincerely hope to see more and more initiatives like this to continue.

High school category

Second Prize

Kensuke Fukushima

“Freeing the Abductees”

I am now ashamed of my previous self who did not show any interest in the North Korean abductions issue.

After watching the animation “Megumi,” I became overwhelmed by the intensity of terror and sadness Megumi Yokota must have felt after being kidnapped and realizing that she would never see her family again. I also felt the pains and desperation of Megumi’s parents, Shigeru and Sakie Yokota, who continue to campaign for their daughter’s rescue today, some 40 years after the abduction. Until I watched the anime, news reports on the abductions issue and families’ appeal for bringing the victims home, only made me think that North Korea did something bad. I did not try to dig a little deeper to learn about the abductions issue and imagine the families’ sorrow. I am ashamed that I did not empathize with the Yokotas, who lost their daughter and continue to work on bringing her back. At the same time, I have come to realize that, as Japanese citizens living in Japan, we must explore what we can do to resolve the situation.

I investigated online and found that people from countries other than Japan are also affected. These countries include Thailand, Romania and Lebanon, making it an issue of the entire international society. We must not let the abduction cases spread to greater communities. My idea as a solution is to initiate an awareness campaign to boost people’s concern. However, the problem with this approach is that many people are currently apathetic toward this case, just like I was before watching the anime. I have explored effective ways of making more people interested in this issue. The journalist Yoshiko Sakurai used the phrase “International Coordination” when referring to this issue. She urged spreading information about the abductions issue to people in other countries so as to initiate an international solution. I believe this is a very effective option. Appealing to people of many other countries should increase international awareness about the tragedy the abductions issue.

As a member of the school’s debate club, I am strongly determined to use the form of “debate” to spread information about the issue. I will start with a familiar means to spark the interest of people around me about the abductions issue. Amidst the recent tide of

globalization, Japan should use its international connections to establish “International Coordination” for the issue. The North Korean abductions are important concerning the human rights of Japanese nationals. There are Japanese families who abruptly lost their family members to abduction. As Japanese citizens, we must become more actively interested in this issue, and put ourselves in the shoes of the Yokotas in examining what we can do. We must support affected families in their desire to be reunited with their loved ones again, and build a greater sense of imagination in perceiving the issue as our own problem.



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