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Japan Rightists Fan Fury Over North Korea Abductions

By NORIMITSU ONISHI

The Japanese government's posters show the map of a blood-red North Korea blotting out the eyes of a Japanese teenager. They hint darkly that this country's youth are at risk and urge Japanese to open their eyes to the threat from North Korea.

The posters were on prominent display at a rally this week to call attention to Japanese abducted by North Korea three decades ago and who, Japan says, are still held there.

The people who usually show up at such events -- family members, their supporters, members of right-wing organizations -- waited for a special first-time guest: Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. "We can never compromise on the abduction issue," Mr. Abe told the crowd. "I swear that my administration will tackle this as its top priority."

Outside Japan, the abductions may have played out long ago, after North Korea's leader, Kim Jong-il, admitted four years ago that the crimes had occurred and returned five survivors. But here, they are still a burning issue, kept alive in the news media every day by nationalist politicians and groups that pound at the topic as firmly as their cherished goals, such as jettisoning the pacifist Constitution and instilling patriotism and moral values in schools.

The highly emotional issue has contributed to silencing more moderate voices who expose themselves to physical harm or verbal threats from the right wing.

By championing this one cause, Mr. Abe rose from obscurity to become prime minister three months ago. But Mr. Abe, who has backpedaled on economic changes undertaken by his popular predecessor, Junichiro Koizumi, has begun to plummet in the polls. To survive politically, he will probably have to keep leaning on the abduction issue.

In a move that raised concerns about the news media's freedom, Mr. Abe recently ordered the public broadcaster, NHK, to further emphasize abductions in its international radio broadcasts. NHK agreed, even though it had already been devoting about a third of its news content to the topic in the first nine months of this year, according to NHK.

The National Police Agency announced last month that it had identified yet another Japanese abductee, Kyoko Matsumoto, the 17th. The police offered no fresh evidence to back up its announcement. Its chief, Iwao Uruma, said simply of the abduction issue, "I want to send a signal that Japan has not forgotten about it."

The announcement fanned anger across the nation as the national media converged on Ms. Matsumoto's hometown, Yonago, a remote city in western Japan. They showed her frail 83-year-old mother clutching the cardigan her daughter had knitted for her before vanishing in 1977.

At a Sunday rally in Yonago, attended by the mother and a brother, right-wing

supporters offered encouragement but also expounded on pet causes. Kazuhiro Araki, national leader of the Investigation Commission on Missing Japanese, a private group, harshly criticized postwar Japan's exclusive emphasis on self-defense and rejection of offensive weapons.

'This is nothing but a complete delusion,' he said.

Later, in an interview in Tokyo, Mr. Araki said he believed the decision to name Ms. Matsumoto was a political one. 'I think there was almost no new information,' he said of the police investigation. 'The Abe administration came into power and told everyone to do something, and so the police offered this card.'

In an interview inside his home in Yonago, Hajime Matsumoto, 59, the brother, said the family was relieved that Ms. Matsumoto had finally been recognized as an abductee. He said he felt uncomfortable that nationalists were trying to advance their causes through unresolved abductions, but he was also philosophical about it.

'In a sense, that can't be helped,' he said. 'For example, if they try to work on educational issues and constitutional revision without the abduction issue, I think it would be extremely difficult to make a breakthrough in Parliament.'

'It's easier for them to put a substantial agenda on the table and place an issue like the abduction issue on top, grouping four or five issues together,' he said. 'It's a means to an end.'

Indeed, this week Mr. Abe's governing Liberal Democrat Party passed an education law that emphasizes patriotism, moral values and the public good. The government built support for the law by paying people to ask leading questions and make supportive statements at town meetings across the country, a government report said.

But the abduction issue is so delicate that the media do not report on the right-wing groups behind the movement, and most Japanese remain unaware of it.

Kyoko Nakayama, special adviser to Mr. Abe on abductions, denied that the government was exploiting the subject. The government says 12 of the 17 Japanese kidnapped by North Korea are still unaccounted for; the North says they died or were never kidnapped in the first place.

'If people see we are taking advantage of the abduction issue for political purposes,' Ms. Nakayama said in an interview, 'I think nobody would support us. A considerable number of Japanese citizens have been abducted. They're not allowed to make even a phone call and have been stripped of their freedom. That fact itself indicates that the security of the Japanese is being threatened.'

Challenging the political importance of the abduction issue has become such a taboo that even opposition politicians refrain from doing so. Liberal journalists and scholars expand privately on the manipulation of the abduction issue, but few dare to make public comments.

'The abduction issue is something that everyone, even schoolchildren, can understand,' said Yoneyuki Sugita, a historian at Osaka University. 'Prime Minister Abe is using this issue to try to carry out certain political goals. North Korea is evil, and to respond against it, he is effectively saying that Japan must revise its Constitution and promote patriotism in its schools. This is the direction in which he is pushing this country. This has been very successful.'

'But it's also very dangerous,' said Mr. Sugita, who received threats from the right wing after publishing an essay on this subject. 'It's become such an emotional issue, and fanned nationalism in such a way, that it has already encroached on freedom of speech.'

The issue has silenced Japanese moderates critical of the government's overall hawkish domestic and foreign policies.

One exception, Koichi Kato, a senior lawmaker in Mr. Abe's Liberal Democratic Party, has been an outspoken critic of hard-line policies toward Asia and of the resurgent nationalism in Japan. In August, a right-wing official angered by Mr. Kato's comments burned down his family home before trying unsuccessfully to commit hara-kiri.

'It's not only the abduction issue, but also anti-China and anti-North Korea sentiments,' Mr. Kato said of the subjects fueling Japanese nationalism, choosing his words cautiously.

Katsumi Sato, 77, leader of the National Association for the Rescue of Japanese Kidnapped by North Korea, a private organization with chapters nationwide, said he was focused only on the abductees. But in an interview, he said many of his group's regional leaders were also active in Nippon Kaigi, Japan's largest nationalist organization, which rejects postwar pacifism, embraces the imperial system and defends Japan's past wars in Asia.

'In the regions, there are some right-wingers in our movement, a fact which makes it look extremely tilted to the right,' said Mr. Sato, who was invited to meet Mr. Abe a few days after he was elected.

In Yonago, Yuichi Imaoka, 81, is the head of both the rescue association and Nippon Kaigi. In Mr. Abe, Mr. Imaoka said he believed he had a leader who would redress what he saw as the perversions of postwar Japan, like the overemphasis on individualism and loss of male prerogative, which, to him, had given women and children too many rights.

Like many in Nippon Kaigi, Mr. Imaoka credits America, not for bringing democracy to Japan, but for emasculating it with pacifism.

'Isn't it ridiculous that it's a taboo to have a debate on whether we should have nuclear arms?' he said, echoing Mr. Abe's top aides. 'We should discuss it freely.'

Correction: December 22, 2006, Friday An article on Sunday about anger in Japan over the abductions of Japanese by North Korea three decades ago misstated the academic affiliation of Yoneyuki Sugita, a historian who was quoted about the sensitivity of the issue in Japan. It is Osaka University of Foreign Studies -- not Osaka University, an unrelated institution.