

# In Megumi's Footsteps

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## Why Japan Obsesses over North Korean Kidnappings

It has been more than 30 years since Megumi Yokota, a 13-year-old junior high school girl, was snatched by North Korean agents as she was walking home from school in the west coast Japanese city of Niigata and spirited away. Yet for many Japanese it might as well have happened yesterday.

Although most of the kidnappings occurred in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the Japanese are more obsessed with determining their true fate than ever before. It complicates Japan's diplomacy and the six-party talks, of which Japan is apart, aimed at ending North Korea's nuclear weapons program.

The abduction issue was very much in the news this week when Koichiro Iizuka, son of Yaeko Taguchi, kidnapped in 1977, flew to Pusan, South Korea, to meet with former North Korean agent Kim Hyon-hui. Now 47, Kim was convicted of the terror bombing of a Korean Airlines passenger jet in 1987, which killed 115 people.

Kim was apprehended along with a co-conspirator sent to South Korea, convicted and sentenced to death, only to receive a pardon on the grounds that she had been, in effect, brain-washed into committing the act. Her connection to the kidnapping issue comes from her claim that the abductee Taguchi taught her Japanese in Pyongyang.

The Japanese believe that its citizens were snatched from Japan against their will in order to provide training in Japanese language and customs for secret agents. Pyongyang denies that Taguchi was Kim's teacher, who taught under the name Lee Un-hae.

It should be noted that there is no dispute that these kidnappings occurred. North Korea's leader, Kim Jong-il admitted the abductions and apologized to former Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi, when Koizumi visited Pyongyang in 2002, saying 12 people were kidnapped. Of these, five were returned to Japan; the other eight died. Case closed.

Japan says it has identified 17 of its citizens as being confirmed kidnap victims. Five were returned leaving, 12 unaccounted for. All of them may still be living, Tokyo maintains, including Megumi and Ms. Taguchi (some would be in advanced age; Yutaka Kume, the first abduction victim, was 52 in 1977).

In 2004 North Korea handed over what it said were the cremated remains of Megumi Yokota, whom Pyongyang asserts committed suicide in 1994 at around the age of 30, but Tokyo says that the North literally cooked the evidence.

The remains, Japan alleges, were cremated at an unusually high temperature in the mistaken belief that it would make DNA identification difficult or impossible. Japanese technicians, however, did manage to make the DNA matchups and say the remains belonged to other people, not Megumi. The North stands by its claim.

To understand how the kidnappings, especially that of Megumi Yokota, are so important to Japanese, it helps to walk in her footsteps on that fateful night November 15, 1977. To do so, I joined Niigata Police Superintendent Shouzaburou Tamura at Yorii Junior High School who explained how Megumi had stayed after school hours with her badminton club. Around 6:30 p.m. she and a couple of her school chums left for home.

Tamura and I walked along the road up the hill past another school yard, houses and apartments. He showed me where Megumi's friends peeled off one by one and how she continued walking up the hill alone until she came to a T intersection, where she would have turned left toward her home, almost in sight 100 meters or so away.

It was here, Tamura believes, that she was kidnapped. It is surmised that North Korean agents were returning from an unsuccessful mission (the Sea of Japan coastline is only about 300 meters further along the road). They spotted Megumi walking alone and fearing they had been recognized or worried about returning empty-handed, they snatched her. She tragically was in the wrong place at the wrong time.

One can't help but be struck by the sheer ordinariness of the circumstances. Megumi was just a typical Japanese schoolgirl, doing typical Japanese school girl activities with her friends living in a typical Japanese neighborhood. No wonder her plight tugs at the country's heart.

Initially, the police pursued the usual suspicions – that she had run away, was kidnapped for ransom or sex, but soon all of the leads (such as they were) turned cold. It was as if she had “disappeared in a puff of smoke,” says her mother Sakie. It would be 20 years before the Yokotas suspected her true fate through information obtained by the debriefing North Korean defectors.

It is no exaggeration to say that resolution of the kidnappings has become the most important foreign policy issue for Japan and the main obstacle to normalization of relations with North Korea. The number of organizations pushing their cause is proliferating wildly.

The families of the abductees have become celebrities. The Yokotas appear on television, at press conferences and are interviewed for their opinions on politics, nuclear weapons and North Korea (the latter not complimentary). Many politicians, including Prime Minister Taro Aso himself, wear the little blue ribbon in their lapel to show solidarity, much as Americans used to wear bracelets with POW names.

But it is a tricky issue for the US, as former president George W. Bush discovered. Bush met in 2008 with the Yokotas at the White House, which the Japanese applauded. Then, as part of the nuclear negotiations, he took North Korea off the list of terror states, which infuriated many Japanese.

Secretary of state Hillary Clinton treaded cautiously when she visited Japan in late February on her first Asian tour. She met for 30 minutes with the Yokotas and other abductee families, listened sympathetically to their stories but made no commitments.

Washington would probably be happy to see the matter disappear. It is a distraction from the main task of disarming North Korea of its nuclear weapons in the six-party talks that may soon get underway with Washington's new negotiator Stephen Bosworth.

However, it may be that the abduction issue is not as tangential to the main subject of the negotiations as one might think. As they say in television court room dramas, it goes to credibility. After all, establishing a protocol to verify the status of the North's weapons is the nub of the exercise.

If the North Koreans can cook the evidence of the cremated remains of Megumi Yokota, as Tokyo alleges, what else are they cooking up?

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