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Japan's 'Antiterror' Debate Neglects the Suffering of the Afghan People

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The Yomiuri Shinbun has announced the formation of the "Ito Kazuya Fund" on November 5th to help rehabilitate Afghanistan. Ito is the young aid worker who was kidnapped and killed in Afghanistan in August. The fund will be initially based on a US$30,000 posthumously awarded to Ito as part of the 15th Yomiuri International Cooperation Prize. Ito's parents, Ito Masuyuki and Junko, were honored at the ceremony at the Imperial Hotel in Tokyo. Ito Masuyuki announced that the prize will be used "to help Afghanistan, via agricultural assistance, to become a country that can provide its people with enough to eat." Japan Focus

Ito Kazuya in Afghanistan

The bill for a New Anti-Terrorism Special Measures Law, which will permit the Maritime Self-Defense Force (MSDF) to continue refueling operations in the Indian Ocean for another year, has become fodder for political maneuvering, as the ruling and opposition parties squabble over a timetable for the dissolution of the House of Representatives. As a journalist who has reported on the Peshawar-kai, the Fukuoka-based nongovernmental organization that pioneered in providing aid to Afghanistan, I do not believe that refueling operations will do much to stamp out terror. I am also very sorry that we are letting an opportunity slip by. We should be reconsidering how to support the increasingly troubled nation of Afghanistan and reassessing Japan's involvement in the war on terror. Instead, we have relegated the matter to the sphere of politics. There are only two and a half months before the first Anti-Terrorism Special Measures Law expires. I think we should debate the matter thoroughly, even if we have to conduct an election in the meantime.

Memorial Service for Ito Kazuya Source: Peshawar-kai

Here's a photo I would like you to see, of a memorial gathering in honor of 31-year-old Ito Kazuya, the Peshawar-kai aid worker who was kidnapped and murdered in Afghanistan in August. Some 800 people, including local leaders, came to pay their respects. I visited this region late last year to report on the activities of the aid group. I followed the irrigation canal they were digging (some 13 kilometers long at the time) and saw the green fields that Ito had helped to till. The people were grateful for the grassroots agricultural aid, and they truly mourned his death. These thoughts, and those memories, fill me with great pain.

Afghanistan is suffering not only from war, but a severe drought as well. A British nongovernmental organization warns that five million people will be threatened by starvation this winter. The fields are parched, and one out five children is likely to die from malnutrition. Hunger has driven some Afghan youths to join militias, where they survive by banditry. Ito and his colleagues were doing their best to break the unhappy chain of violence created by poverty and lawlessness. I could see that their efforts were being rewarded, by the refugees who came back to live on the green land near the irrigation canal, and by the people who were building houses again.

Afghan villagers carry the body of a Japanese aid worker Kazuya Ito in the village of Bodyalai in Nangarhar Province on August 27, 2008

Compare this to the "war on terror" that the United States has been intensifying in Afghanistan. Far from restoring security, multinational forces in the country lost 43 soldiers in August -- the highest monthly death toll ever. In addition to this, more than 700 civilians lives were lost this year to incidents such as off-target bombing attacks -- another record. Afghan resentment against foreign troops and governments is stronger than ever before.

Although both Ito's activities and the refueling operations were aimed at bringing peace to Afghanistan, there is a crucial difference between the two missions. The difference lies in the way the local people feel about them. Prime Minister Aso insists that the refueling mission is part of Japan's obligation as a member of the international community, but he speaks with complete disregard for the quagmire that Afghanistan has become, and as if the Afghan people were not co-members of that same "international community." He is entirely lacking in the ability to grasp the faraway land of Afghanistan as an extension of his own reality. It seems to me that Aso's failure to confront the reality of the war on terror is an outcome of that inability.

When I think of Afghanistan, I try to think of Japan as it was 63 years ago. Japan was also a field of ruins under the rule of a pro-American government. It was also trying to rebuild itself after a disastrous war with supervision and help from the international community. Now, what if the American military had insisted on "mopping up" adverse elements and had continued to bomb the countryside? What if many innocent people had died, including children? Would the Japanese people have accepted their defeat as easily as they did?

Dispersed members of the one-time rulers of Afghanistan, the Taliban, are still fighting. "Warriors," whose poverty and hatred make them easy recruits for suicide missions, keep joining them. Can we simply write these people off as religious fanatics and "terrorists" who lie beyond our comprehension? Terrorism is not to be condoned, but before we censure them at the international level, we should remember that the death of a man like Kazuya Ito, who shared the suffering of the Afghan people, has done more to communicate to them the inhumanity of terrorist acts.

The Afghan problem has reached a turning point. The Mainichi Shinbun has learned that the Afghan government is conducting peace negotiations with Taliban leader Mullah Omar. The government, in other words, has discovered the limits of force in subduing a group that gains power by purporting to reflect the anger of the Afghan people. The United States, on the other hand, will probably conduct a new "war on terror" under a new president. At a crucial time like this, the Japanese government is staying clear of meaningful debate, in favor of political squabbling about when the new law should be deliberated.

Nakamura Tetsu, head of the Peshawar-kai in Pakistan and Afghanistan, once said that the basic tenet of the group was to "respect life and work toward a common humanity." This should also be the motto of our government. The concept of "international society" that supposedly gives credence to our new anti-terrorism law gives no thought to the people of Afghanistan nor to their suffering from war and drought. I sincerely hope that both the ruling and opposition parties will lay aside their differences and make an effort to break the chain of poverty and hatred that gives sustenance to terrorism.

"I want to learn together with the people. I want to do what I can to help them make an environment where children will some day not go without food." Ito wrote these words five years ago, when he first applied for membership in the Peshawar-kai. The wishes of the deceased should no go unheeded.

This article appeared in The Mainichi Shinbun on October 30, 2008. It is posted at Japan Focus on November 6, 2008.

See the following articles on the aid work of Peshawar-kai and Ito Kazuya in Afghanistan.

Michael Penn, The Slaying of Ito Kazuya: Japan in Afghanistan

Nakamura Tetsu, An Omen: The Death Of a Young Child

Nakamura Tetsu, U.S. Bombing of Afghan Irrigation Prompts Backlash

Nakamura Tetsu, Words on Receiving the Okinawa Peace Prize