



THE PENINSULA

Decades On, Japan Presses North Korea Over Abducted Citizens

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On March 6, 2025, *The Washington Post* published a [full-page article](#) entitled “Abductions of Japanese citizens by North Korea: Decades after their disappearance, only one parent generation left.” This was not a traditional news story from *The Post*, and the paper carefully and explicitly made clear that this was not generated internally but by the government of Japan.

This is not the first time that the Japanese government and the official government body dealing with North Korea’s abduction of Japanese citizens have published an opinion advertisement in the U.S. media. Three years ago, on February 28, 2022, *The New York Times* carried a similar [paid opinion piece](#). That article included a discussion of Americans who may have been abducted by North Korean operatives, particularly [David Sneddon](#), an American student who disappeared in southwest China in 2004 when he was twenty-four years old.

The full-page piece in *The Washington Post* gives a brief summary of North Korea’s [abduction of at least seventeen Japanese citizens](#) in the late 1970s and early 1980s. In 2002, as Japan and North Korea made an effort toward reconciliation, North Korea admitted that several Japanese citizens had been abducted by North Korean intelligence operatives, and [five Japanese abductees](#) were permitted to leave North Korea and return to Japan. The Japanese government has continued to work for the return of other Japanese citizens, but their efforts have not been successful. A downturn in relations between North

Korea and Japan has led to no further progress in securing the release of the abducted Japanese citizens. The Japanese government officially maintains that seventeen were abducted and that twelve of those individuals have not been returned to Japan.

Recent Death of Akihiro Arimoto, Father of Abductee Keiko Arimoto

Tokyo published their piece in *The Washington Post* after Akihiro Arimoto, the father of abductee Keiko Arimoto, passed away on February 14, 2025, at the age of ninety-six. Arimoto's death was widely reported in the Japanese news media, including in *The Japan Times*, *The Japan News*, and *Kyodo News*.

In October 1983, Keiko Arimoto, the twenty-three-year-old daughter of Akihiro Arimoto and his wife Kayoko, was studying in England. She posted her last letter to her parents in October 1983 from Copenhagen, Denmark, where she was traveling. The parents never received another letter or any further communication from their daughter. Her location and fate were not known.

Later, a North Korean woman, the former wife of a North Korean terrorist agent involved in the 1970 hijacking of Japan Airlines Flight 351, testified to her involvement in the abduction of Keiko Arimoto. North Korean government officials acknowledged the abductions in 2002 when North Korea and Japan made brief progress in improving bilateral relations. North Korean officials, however, claimed that Keiko and several other abductees had died before 2002 but never provided evidence to substantiate that claim.

Akihiro Arimoto and his wife did not accept North Korea's assertion and continued to believe she was still living and being held in North Korea. Akihiro was one of the most prominent and leading advocates for the release of the abductees. When U.S. President Joe Biden made his first presidential visit to Tokyo in May 2022, he met with the families of Japanese abductees, Akihiro Arimoto was one of two parents of abductees present for that meeting. Biden called on North Korea "to right this historic wrong and provide a full accounting of the Japanese nationals who remain missing." The abduction issue remains a sensitive issue for the Japanese people and their government, and U.S. officials have shown special attention and support for the families when they visit Japan.

The Fate of Megumi Yokota

With the recent death of Arimoto, the sole living parent of an abductee is Sakie Yokota, the mother of Megumi Yokota, who was abducted in 1977 when she was only thirteen years old. North Korean military agents kidnapped her as she was on her way home from school. The North Korean government admitted that she was abducted, but officials claim she married a South Korean man (who was also abducted by North Korean agents), had a daughter, and died in North Korea. When I was Special Envoy for North Korean Human Rights, I met with Sakie Yokota and her husband Shiguru in Tokyo on one of my trips there. They told me that just a few weeks earlier, they were permitted to meet their grandchild and son-in-law in Mongolia. They were told that their daughter had died, but they were not convinced that was true.

When the United Nations Commission of Inquiry examined human rights in North Korea, the commission was told that North Korea sent a copy of Megumi's death certificate and her cremated remains. Experts, however, said the death certificate appeared to be falsified, and the DNA testing of the remains was not a positive match for Megumi.

Tae Yong-ho, former deputy chief of mission at the North Korean embassy in London who defected to South Korea with his family in 2016, provided additional information about Megumi's fate. In a memoir of his experiences as a senior North Korean official, he reported that the controversy over Megumi's ashes between Kim Jong Il's staff and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs resulted in a special report that concluded Megumi died of a mental illness at a psychiatric institution in a remote area of North Korea.

Because the abduction issue became a major topic of negotiation between North Korea and Japan, Kim's staff ordered that her remains be found so they could be returned to the Japanese government. There were no records of her burial place, however. Inmates who died at the mental hospital were simply buried on a mountain near the hospital or asylum without a funeral. Graves were not marked, and no accurate records were kept of the location of individual bodies. When Pyongyang ordered the return of Megumi's remains, hospital officials relied on the memory of a staff member to find the place where her remains were buried. The remains were sent to Japan, but when the DNA was tested, it was clear that the remains were not that of Megumi.

Thae believed that Kim wanted the normalization of relations and economic aid and was genuinely surprised by the outrage from the Japanese press and the Japanese government when the remains were determined not to be hers.

The Last Parent Alive

It is now over four decades since the first Japanese citizens were abducted by the North Korean military in the late 1970s. The continuing intensity of feelings about the issue is reflected in the Japanese government's publication of the full-page newspaper article in *The Washington Post*. The photographs of the parents in the article show Mr. Arimoto and Mrs. Yokota holding documents with Trump's distinctive signature, likely dating from the time of his first term, also reflect the importance of the abductees to the Japanese people.

The Yokota family has been the leading voice of Japanese family members who have relatives abducted by North Korean agents. The association of abductee families was led by Megumi Yokota's father, Shigeru Yokota, and her grieving mother became one of the leading figures for the abductee cause.

At eighty-nine years old, Mrs. Yokota is more limited in terms of what she is able to do, and leadership of the abductee cause in Japan has passed on to the next generation. A couple of years ago, Takuya Yokota, Megumi Yokota's younger brother, became president of the Association of Families of Victims Kidnapped by North Korea and is now leading the effort to remember the victims abducted by North Korea. All indications are the abduction issue will continue to define Japan-North Korea relations for at least the rest of this decade.

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