



North Korean Human Rights Abuses Awareness Week

Essay Competition 2024

Awarded essay

Towards the Immediate Rescue of All Abductees!

Until We Can Grab Hold of Their Hands Again

KOHARA Aeru

9th grade, Kurashiki Municipal Higashi Junior High School

I go to school and come home from school after extracurricular activities. At home, my family and I have warm meals together, and later I go to bed. This is my daily life and was YOKOTA Megumi's life until she was abducted by a North Korean agent. It was her freedom that was taken away so easily and quickly in one day.

She cried and screamed for help in a boat taking her to North Korea, and scratched the walls so hard, in order to get out, that her nails were torn and hands were all bloody. Just hearing this story could tell me the horrendousness of this incident, and I could hear Megumi's devastating calls for help. Moreover, imagining her difficult days in North Korea, I felt a tightness in my chest that made it hard to breathe. More than 17 Japanese nationals have been abducted by North Korea. I would want to come home right away if I were her. Those who were abducted by North Korea are extending their arms to be rescued, but for over 40 years, we haven't been able to reach their hands. They have not been able to return to Japan.

This year, I attended the Junior High School Summit meeting on the abductions issue as a prefectural representative and had a chance to listen to YOKOTA Takuya, Megumi's brother. The abductees' devastation is huge, but the anxiety and frustration of their families are even greater. The strong wish to see them again pierced me like an arrow shot straight at my heart. Resonating with that wish, I resolved to bring the abductees back no matter what.

Participants of the summit meeting and government officials are just a handful compared to the entire Japanese population. There are limits to solving the extremely heavy issue of abductions with only a handful of people. That is why, to resolve the abductions issue, each citizen must become aware of it and strengthen their resolve to bring the abductees home. The more people who are committed, the stronger the power to resolve the issue. Unfortunately, many people in Japan do not know about the abductions issue, and many know only the surface of it. As someone who has become aware of the abductions issue and strongly wishes for the victims' return, I must take the lead in widely sharing the current situation of the abductions issue. Like this summit meeting had formed my decision to bring them home, this essay may give people a chance to learn about the abductions issue. In Niigata Prefecture, many schools offer activities to increase students' awareness of the issue. I recollect nearly nothing like that ever happening in my school. I believe that there should not be no disparities in addressing issues that concern the entire nation of Japan. Abduction is also a human rights violation that unjustly takes away people's freedom. I recommend schools to offer students an opportunity to learn about this issue during Human Rights Week, so that they will have a chance to think about it as their own issue.

Freedom deprived abductees are still waiting. We have to reach out to grab their extended arms.

Freedom of Speech

USHIO Kanane

9th grade, Hiroshima Prefectural Hiroshima Junior High School

“North Korea is to blame, but aren’t we sinful not to take action while living in a free country, Japan?”

August 9th, I participated in a Junior High School summit meeting on the abductions issue, as a junior high school representative from the prefecture. The above statement given by a family of an abductee left with me the greatest impression.

Since I was chosen for the meeting, I did a lot of research, watching an animation movie “Megumi,” reading many brochures, in addition to reading a book written by one of the abductees’ families. Prior to my research, I didn’t have a clue about this issue and thought it was just something that happened a long time ago. I felt it was irrelevant to me, but I was wrong. I had learned that there could be over 800 people who may have been abducted by the North Korean regime and only 5 people have come home so far. People who have not yet come home may still be living in North Korea, and their families are still feeling devastated about what had happened. This is an ongoing issue. When YOKOTA Megumi, who was featured in the movie Megumi, was 13, when she was abducted. She was 2 years younger than me. How scared and devastated she must’ve been. I’m ashamed for thinking this issue as a story of the past and irrelevant to me.

Becoming more interested in this issue, I once told one of my friends. “I’ve been researching into the abductions issue lately.” She smiled wryly and said, “Oh wow! That must be hard. I can’t do that.” I would have said the same if I hadn’t been given the chance to join the meeting. However, now these words feel odd to me. The abductions issue presents very difficult and delicate matters. Nevertheless, it would be wrong not to learn about the issue or do nothing.

According to the families of the victims, there are very few parents of abductees who are still alive. This shows just how many years have passed. What can I do for resolution of this urgent issue? I think. I can tell what I have learned to many many people.

If I weren’t given the chance to join the meeting, I would have been spending the days of my life indifferently, unaware of the abductions issue. Abductees and their families, in the meantime, have lost the same days of their lives that were filled with simple happiness.

“Aren’t we sinful not to take action while living in a free country, Japan?”

We are free to speak out while abductees in North Korea can’t, even now. I’ve decided to teach people about the abductions issue, about families of abductees and the government who are still fighting to resolve the issue, as well as the importance of never letting the issue fade away or giving up.

Dark Clouds of Abduction Cast over a Happy Blue Sky

TAMURA Gentaro

9th grade, Shibushi Municipal Isakida Junior High School

The title of this essay was a catchphrase that my group used in our dramatized public awareness message on North Korean abduction at the Junior High School Summit on the Abductions Issue. Japan is a democratic country where people are granted peaceful lives and freedom. All the abductees lived under a happy color--the blue sky--until the sky was suddenly covered by ominous dark clouds from a North Korean abduction. We wish for the dark abduction clouds to disappear and the happy sun to come back as soon as possible. Under a happy blue sky, every abductee would return home, meet their families, and live happily ever after again. We made that catch phrase with this wish.

I look back on the trip to the meeting from Kagoshima to Tokyo. Unfortunately, the sky was overcast, and we experienced turbulence, and I felt uneasy, but then, the airplane soared above the clouds, where the sunny sky spread. We just couldn't see it from the ground. I might be told that this is inappropriate, but with a prayerful heart, I wanted to imagine the lives of those who were abducted. YOKOTA Megumi for example, was only 13 when she was abducted, about my age. She must've felt terrible being taken away from her beloved family, forced to live under dark clouds, and not being able to see her family for 47 years. It has been a long time of devastation, fear, and suffering, but she has married and has had a daughter, KIM Haekyung. Perhaps, in North Korea, Megumi has found a small measure of happiness and are looking at a beautiful, clear blue sky. No, at the very least, I hope that is the case.

The abductees have lost decades of their time with their loved ones. The families of the abductees have lost their loved ones and have been waiting for decades for their return. We must not forget this reality and historical fact. Abduction is a serious human rights violation and must never be tolerated. What can I, with my limited power, do to help resolve this issue as soon as possible? To prevent this issue from fading into obscurity, I must first continue to stay involved in it myself and then encourage those around me to get involved as well. And I will continue to pray and hope that the situation will move towards resolution as soon as possible, bringing peace of mind to the abductees and their families.

Don't Let the Abductions Issue Fade Away; Things I can DO

FUKUDOME Koki

10th grade, Kagoshima Prefectural Konan High School

I was born on August 12th, 2008, exactly 30 years after North Korean agents abducted a couple from Fukiagehama Beach in Hioki city. This is one of numerous abduction cases.

I became interested in this issue since I had a chance to listen to a North Korean radio station, Radio Pyongyang. Unable to understand the language, I did research on North Korea, stumbled upon the abductions issue, and I also found that some of the victims' families lived near my area. How hard for them to lose loved ones suddenly. How hard for them to see 46 years slip by without any resolution. People other than the families began to forget about the incidents, and many young people don't even know about them. The abductions issue is unresolved and fading, away from Japanese people's minds.

What can I do to stop this? In the summer of 2023, I decided to visit ICHIKAWA Kenichi and his wife, Ryuko. At their house, I found many frog figurines and stuffed animal frogs, symbolic figures for safe return.

Kenichi's brother Shuichi went missing in August 12th, 1978, along with his girlfriend, MASUMOTO Rumiko, after they went to the beach to see the sunset. Fifteen years later in 1993, their families learned that the couple was abducted by the North Korean regime. Until then, the family avoided talking about Shuichi because it was hard for the parents to think about their son. Wishing his safe return, Shuichi's mother Tomi used to say she only wanted Shuichi to be safe wherever he was. Sadly, Tomi and Taira, Shuichi's father, have passed away without ever seeing Shuichi again. Today, Kenichi and Ryuko now strongly wish to reunite with Shuichi while they are still alive. Although they are anxious about the lack of progress and people's diminishing interest, they continue their public outreach activities, giving speeches and collecting petitions, while keeping their day-to-day lives.

Feeling that having people learn about the facts of the issue is one way to keep the issue current, I made a poster on the abductions issue for my school research project, but people showed very little interest. I could not stop there, so I asked Mr. and Mrs. ICHIKAWA to visit my school to give a speech. The speech was very moving. Everyone listened attentively. Some had teary eyes.

I celebrate August 12th because it's my birthday, but now, I also think about the abductees and their families. That is the only way to keep the issue current. "Shuichi will return. The lucky frog will bring him home." I will keep educating young people about the abductions issue till the families' wishes come true.

Until the Day “I’m Home”

HASHIMA Naho

10th grade, Kagoshima Prefectural Sendai High School

“Please help us!” The voice echoed in the midsummer blue sky.

I have been working with Mr. and Mrs. ICHIKAWA, the family of an abductee, on the issue of Japanese abductions by North Korea, including his younger brother Shuichi. Last year, the couple told me about Shuichi, and I worked hard to raise awareness about the abductions issue among my generation. This summer in my first high school year, one of my friends who was in the school’s broadcasting club wanted to interview me about my efforts on the abductions issue. I was delighted to have someone joining the effort on the abductions issue.

August 9th, near Fukiagehama Beach where the abduction occurred, Mr. and Mrs. ICHIKAWA and I handed out flyers to cars passing by, asking for any information on the disappearance of Shuichi. My first public outreach activity handing out printouts with pictures of Shuichi and MASUMOTO Rumiko made me anxious. Will people understand?

“Please help us!”

I gathered my courage and called out. And then, warm encouraging words came back.

“I’m with you. Keep up your good work!”

In the meantime, determined Mr. and Mrs. ICHIKAWA kept bowing and calling out, “It has been 46 years since Shuichi was abducted. Please don’t let this issue fade. Please keep fighting with us till they come home.” I felt Mr. and Mrs. ICHIKAWA’s love toward their brother.

Later, we went to the beach of the abduction site. The East China Sea, as seen from the sandy beach, was so calm that it made me wonder, “Is this really the place?” It was in stark contrast to the rough waves of the Sea of Japan at the abduction site of YOKOTA Megumi, which I visited last year.

Two days later, I visited ICHIKAWA’s resident again. I saw a hand-woven Oshima Tsumugi kimono, which Shuichi had gifted to his mother using his first paycheck. His mother had said she would wear it the day Shuichi comes home. She passed away without ever putting her arms in the kimono. Mrs. ICHIKAWA said with tears in her eyes, “I appreciate mother’s love when I air the kimono every year.” They showed me letters that his mother wrote on his birthday with lots of love, his cigarettes, vinyl records, and encyclopedias. Time had stopped 46 years ago. I could not help tears from welling up in my eyes either. I pledged my effort once again to do my best and find more friends to join the effort.

At the end of our meeting, the couple expressed their frustration.

“It has been 46 years and the Japanese government still can’t rescue the abductees. Is this the kind of Japan we want? As the same Japanese national as abductees, what can you do to rescue all abductees? Parents give unconditional love to their children. We want young people to know that and contemplate the situation as if their own loved ones were abducted.”

The abductions issue is ongoing. Many families are still waiting for their loved ones’ return. It’s not a matter of age. We should all keep getting involved and offering support. People shouldn’t avoid the issue because it’s a difficult diplomatic issue. I want many people to get accurate information and know the facts. I will not give up until the day I hear “I’m home” from all the abductees.

Keep Thinking Together

SHUKU Reona

10th grade, Seifu Nankai Junior High/High School

I have watched recorded video messages of families of North Korean abductees for the first time. While I watched, I became so sad and distressed that I couldn't bear to watch, and my heart ached. How were these events possible? How could anyone do this? My emotion turned into anger. No, this should never have happened.

Abductions by North Korea; crimes that suddenly destroyed peoples' lives. These people were unjustly deprived of everyday peace. I was not born yet when these multiple abductions happened, and yet, many abducted people have not returned home. Everyone should reflect on how to resolve the issue of abduction.

Video messages of the families are filled with love for their children, parents, and siblings. While they must feel terrible about the whole situation, the families looked straight at the camera and talked and expressed their wish to see the lost families, hear their voices, or know their whereabouts. I felt the deep love and resilience, and at the same time, their desperate hope. I realized this was not someone else's problem; I needed to be involved.

The Japanese government has consistently raised the abductions issue in every diplomatic communication with North Korea. And the North Korean regime, which had initially denied involvement, has admitted and apologized for the wrong doing. Since then, 5 abductees have been returned after being held in North Korea for 24 years. The Japanese government has continued to make every effort, using all possible means, to rescue the abductees. Despite that, very little information about the abductees has been revealed, and we have no knowledge whatsoever about their whereabouts.

We need to be engaged and tell many young people about this sad truth. The abductions issue is an issue between 2 countries, but we also need to recognize it is a serious crime that has deprived precious human rights from many people. No one from any country should be a victim of this. I have learned many things since I began writing this essay. I researched the abductees families' blue-ribbon campaign. Many people wear blue ribbon pins as an insignia of commitment to resolving the issue. The blue color represents the Japan Sea that sits between Japan and North Korea, and the blue sky, the only thing that connects abductees to their families. I hope that all abductees will get the opportunity to meet their families in Japan under a blue sky. The first step we can take is to be engaged in resolving the issue and keep thinking about it.

Abduction is a global issue

TAKATA Masakazu

9th grade, Maizuru City Kasa Junior High School

We cannot just “know” about the abduction issue. If Megumi and her family had not been abducted, they would still be living an ordinary, happy life. Such a daily life was interrupted by the abduction.

In August, I participated in the “Junior High School Summit on the Abduction Issue.” There, I listened to a lecture by Takuya Yokota, the younger brother of Megumi Yokota, a victim of abduction.

The abduction refers to the incident about fifty years ago when North Korea abducted young Japanese citizens to train their agents. Although North Korea admitted the fact, only 5 out of 17 abductees have returned. Even after half a century, the abduction issue remains unresolved.

What we can do to solve the abduction issue is to first watch the anime “Megumi.” At the summit, Mr. Yokota emphasized the importance of thinking about it as a personal matter. It is crucial to watch it with the mindset of “What if my beloved family or friends were suddenly taken away?” After the summit, I watched “Megumi” again. It looked completely different. The first time I watched it was when I was 7th grade. At that time, I watched it as a bystander. Now, I can feel the pain and suffering of the family. I understood the meaning of “as a personal matter” that Mr. Yokota mentioned, and I became able to assert it in my own words.

According to a public opinion survey, the percentage of people interested in the abduction issue is 73.6%. As the awareness of the issue fades over time, it is necessary to spread the abduction issue. The internet and social media are used by a wide range of age groups, from young people to the elderly. By utilizing information and communication technology, it is possible to disseminate information widely.

The families of the abductees are aging, and Megumi’s father, Shigeru, passed away in 2020 without meeting his beloved daughter. Therefore, the abduction issue is a race against time.

Conflicts continue around the world today, such as the invasion of Ukraine and the conflict in Palestine. It is common to see reports of conflicts when you turn on the TV. However, we must not forget about the abduction issue. It has been a silent battle for much longer than wars.

From Mr. Yokota’s lecture, the desire of the abductees to “return to Japan as soon as possible” touched strongly in my heart. The abduction issue is not the past, and Megumi and others are still waiting for help with the single-minded desire to “meet their families.”

Therefore, I believe that raising our voices in cooperation with the world for the early return of the abductees will be the driving force for their rescue. As a participant in the summit, I felt a mission to disseminate the abduction issue. It is necessary to widely disseminate the current situation of the abduction issue and what we can do. I want to actively participate in future activities for the early return of the abductees.

A first step to solve the abduction issue

GU Zui

8th grade, Itano Junior High School

I can't forgive the abduction by North Korea. If I were a member of the family of Yokota Megumi, I would feel desperate every day of my life. The family lost her, their beloved daughter, unreasonably by the way of "abduction" and they've never known about her since then. But, they have never given up and have taken many actions to get her back.

I didn't know anything about the abduction issue before. I became a participant of JHS summit this year, so I learned about it. I could understand the fact and severity of it. How about other junior high school students? When they hear about the abduction issue, what will they think? I think they will not be interested, and say "I see...and what?" Probably they don't know about it, and may think it doesn't matter to them.

I think it's a big problem that there are many people who don't know about the abduction issue or think it doesn't matter to them. We should solve this problem first. So, I think it's most important to change people's mind, from "I don't know about it" to "I have heard of it."

To do that, the most effective way is using internet or SNS to send and receive the information about the abduction issue. Recently, smartphones are everywhere, and almost all of my classmates possess them. When we send more messages about the abduction issue using the internet, then more people that we don't know can receive and understand the issue. It's easier to use SNS compared to talking to each person, isn't it? However, sending messages using the internet or SNS may cause insults or misunderstandings. But nevertheless, if we debate about the issues, many people may watch the debates. That will increase the number of people who know the issue. Debating about it will deepen our interests in it. Moreover, we should send this message that "the abduction issue is our own affair." I think this idea is especially important.

Someone may think, "Can we solve the issue in such a way?" The answer is maybe "No" but it's enough for us, junior high school students. I read the brochure about the abduction issue published by the government. One question is: What can we Japanese people do to solve the abduction issue? The answer I found is, "When each Japanese person expresses strong determination that we will never forgive abductions and we will definitely get all the abductees back as soon as possible, it will be a strong support to solve this issue."

The abduction happened in the past, but it is the ongoing problem, and hasn't been resolved yet. I think using internet or SNS is the most effective way to inform the younger generation like us about the issue. We can even convey this information beyond the border. So, I want people all over the world to know the issue, not only Japanese. I'm glad if my idea contributes to resolving the abduction issue.

Passing The Baton

MORIE Sakura

11th Grade, Ehime Prefectural Saijo High School

What would you do if your child suddenly disappeared and never returned? In 1977, this tragedy actually happened when 13-year-old Megumi Yokota was abducted by North Korean agents. The story of the Yokota family is a symbol of the abduction issue perpetrated by North Korea and represents the painful reality Japan continues to face. Despite ongoing efforts, this severe violation of human rights remains unresolved. As future leaders, we young people have a responsibility to understand this issue in depth and raise awareness globally. We must take the baton in this struggle for justice and continue to run forward.

I first learned about the North Korean abductions when I was in elementary school. At the time, I was completely unaware of the abduction issue and only truly understood the facts after recently watching the anime “MEGUMI” in my civics class. Upon watching the movie, I was deeply moved to learn that, although many decades passed, Megumi’s family never lost hope to be reunited with her and still pursue the issue in search of the truth. Inspired by their tireless efforts, I too want to bring greater attention to the abduction issue.

According to the Cabinet Office’s 2023 survey, 73.6% of respondents were concerned about the abduction issue, down more than 10% from 86.4% in 2013. However, what shocked me most was that among respondents aged 18-29 only 64.1% were concerned. As the families of those abducted grow older, it becomes even more critical that we don’t forget the feelings of the abductees. At my school’s culture festival in November, I’m planning to create original flyers to raise awareness of the abductions and distribute them to students, teachers, parents and my wider community. By creating opportunities for everyone to gain awareness, we can achieve the earliest possible return of all abductees.

In addition, it’s vital to remember this is a global issue that requires international cooperation to resolve. Abductions by North Korea have been made not only in Japan, but also in many other countries including China, Thailand, and France. Therefore, I must take advantage of my English ability to actively participate in many intercultural events and volunteer activities where I can interact with foreigners and exchange opinions on this issue. By listening to international perspectives, we can collectively deepen our understanding of the issue.

In conclusion, I strongly believe the abduction issue must be resolved from the perspective that it’s not simply someone else’s story, but a universal issue every citizen should be concerned with. By again watching the animation MEGUMI, I was able to feel even closer to the feelings of the abductees and renew my interest in the issue with even greater strength. Moving forward, I will take the baton in this struggle for justice by creating opportunities for people, regardless of nationality, to become interested in the issue. By taking positive action myself, I hope to become a bridge to the future that will fulfill the lifelong wishes of the abductees and their families.

Silent Victims

FUCHIWAKI Uta

11th Grade, Kagoshima Joho High School

Imagine a family member telling you they are going to the beach to watch the sunset, but they never return.

This happened to Shuichi Ichikawa and Rumiko Masumoto in 1978 in my hometown Kagoshima when they were abducted by North Korean agents. Not only were their lives changed, but also the lives of their families, friends and relatives. Since then, their families have been campaigning, collecting signatures and appealing to the government to get them home. However, sadly, in 2002, the North Korean government admitted and apologized for abducting Japanese citizens. They confirmed that eight of the victims including Shuichi and Rumiko had already passed away. Despite hearing this shocking news and the lack of North Korea's transparency, the families still believe their loved ones are alive and continue to fight for the truth or bring them home.

I actually had the chance to talk with Mr. Ichikawa, the brother of Shuichi Ichikawa. He has gone through innumerable tough times, but the situation hasn't really changed. When I talked to my classmates about the abduction issue, many of them weren't even aware of this problem and that's when I realized that this could be because of the younger generation, and our lack of understanding, cooperation and help. I feel even more strongly about this issue now because I am the younger generation. I feel compelled to stand up more for this cause and take action to make sure Mr. Ichikawa will suffer less. I am taking this opportunity to share with you two solutions.

First, my generation seems to be unaware about these abductions. Mr. Ichikawa told me that he is afraid of the abduction issues fading away. He also mentioned that, currently the youth are not interested in petitions and ignore flyers. Ignorance is a major concern and must be acknowledged as one of the biggest problems. So, we must continue to debate, discuss and deepen our understanding among the younger generations. I am sure that Mr. Ichikawa would be pleased if we are more willing to work on this issue.

Second, Mr. Ichikawa said that he desperately wants to hold a summit with North Korea to directly discuss and negotiate, aiming to change the situation and reach the truth. But to make this happen, all generations must cooperate with the signature campaign. If people have a strong will, diplomacy will spread, Mr. Ichikawa said.

Mr. Ichikawa's mother passed away without seeing her son and could never wear the kimono Shuichi gave to her. Mr. Ichikawa said when it is Shuichi's birthday the family can't talk about him and keeps silent. While their voices are silent, their house is filled with frog memorabilia from supporters around Japan. So, he always remains in their hearts as the meaning of frog in Japanese is to return.

The least we can do is sign a petition, keep negotiations open and finally keep engaging the youth to give the silent victims a voice. Please, let us help keep Mr. Ichikawa's will alive.