

Policy Forum 07-076: Targeting Chongryun?



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By Anthony DiFilippo

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I. Introduction

Anthony DiFilippo, Professor of Sociology at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania, writes, "Whether or not Ogata and his associates intended to cheat Chongryun is actually quite separate from the question of whether Chongryun and Chongryun Koreans, a minority in Japan that has long been subjected to oppressive and discriminatory treatment, have bore the political brunt of Tokyo's recent disagreements with Pyongyang on the nuclear, missile and especially the abduction issues."

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II. Article by Anthony DiFilippo

- "Targeting Chongryun?"

By Anthony DiFilippo

Today, Chongryun (the Korean name for the General Association of Korean Residents in Japan), an organization that supports the government of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) employs about 10,000 workers and claims to have between 150,000 and 200,000 members and supporters in Japan. Because of the DPRK missile tests in July 2006, Tokyo put into effect a 2004 law that authorized it to bar the North Korean ship, the Man Gyong Bong-92, from entering the Japanese port in Niigata. Before this, literally thousands of Chongryun Koreans regularly traveled back and forth from Japan to North Korea in what for them were important visits to their homeland. Just a few months ago Chongryun believes that Tokyo took another caustic step, this one aimed directly at the association itself. This past spring and summer Chongryun was unsuccessful in its attempt to sell its headquarters in Tokyo. This event created a story that still raises more questions than there are good answers available.

Perhaps the most important of the unanswered questions is whether the attempted sale of Chongryun's headquarters to Shigetake Ogata, the former spy chief for the Japanese government who used to monitor Chongryun, involved fraud. That the Tokyo District Public Prosecutors Office twice arrested Ogata, along with the deal-broker Tadao Mitsui and erstwhile banker Koji Kawae, strongly suggests that Japan's Ministry of Justice believes that some criminal acts have been committed against Chongryun, which itself has not been accused of any wrongdoing.

But here lies the rub of this intriguing story. Defending Chongryun, which Tokyo has identified as a subversive organization, has typically not been the hallmark of Japanese government at any level. Apart from Chongryun, nobody complained much when Tokyo Governor Shintaro Ishihara arbitrarily decided in 2003 to rescind the association's tax-exempt status, which it had for more than three decades. Although Ishihara had been governor since 1999, his decision four years later to have Chongryun pay taxes came on the heels of Kim Jong Il's admission to Japan's former Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi during his visit to Pyongyang in September 2002 that DPRK agents, acting without government authority, had been responsible for abducting Japanese nationals in the 1970s and 1980s. Soon after Ishihara's decision, the Tokyo Metropolitan Government confiscated the association's properties for a while because of Chongryun's inability to pay its taxes. Using Ishihara's decision as a precedent, other localities in Japan eventually removed Chongryun's tax-exempt status. In a repeat of the past, Chongryun's failure pay its taxes this year has recently caused the Tokyo Metropolitan Government to claim control of Chongryun's headquarters.

Even though there has never been public evidence showing that Kim was lying to Koizumi, i.e., that Pyongyang had officially been behind the kidnappings, for Japanese nationalists Kim's admission brought fresh fury to the fire that had long kept Japan and North Korea far apart in efforts to normalize diplomatic relations. Driven by a political agenda with deep historical roots and exacerbated by the animus leftover from the Cold War, the Japanese nationalists went to work; they implicated Chongryun and Chongryun Koreans. By claiming that Chongryun had a direct hand in the kidnappings, nationalists not only focused the Japanese peoples' attention squarely on the inexcusable brutality connected to the abductions, but they also deepened the discrimination in the country toward Chongryun Koreans, including schoolchildren. One human rights group in Japan working on behalf of Koreans indicates that hundreds of harassment cases against Korean children occurred after Kim's admission that North Korea was responsible for the abduction of Japanese

people. So severe and threatening was this harassment problem that Korean girls could no longer wear the Chima-Chogori, their Korean school uniform.

Chongryun does not equivocate in its support for the DPRK and it knows firsthand that some people assume that it was involved in the abductions. However, it forthrightly denies any connection to the abductions, pointing out the Chongryun Koreans were as shocked as everyone else in Japan to learn of Kim's admission of the DPRK's involvement in the kidnappings. Chongryun also knows that Ishihara took away its tax-exempt status because of the abduction issue and believes that fellow nationalist Shinzo Abe, Japan's most recent former prime minister, had been targeting the association for nearly two years.

Chongryun maintains that since its beginning in 1955, it has always had to deal with problems in Japan. Chongryun stresses that from the start it adopted a noninterventionist position with regard to Japanese politics, a position that is the polar opposite of Tokyo's working assumption that the association requires constant surveillance by the government. Chongryun indicates that its problems noticeably increased after August 1998, when Pyongyang launched a Taepodong 1 missile that flew over Japanese territory; they became markedly worse subsequent to Kim's disclosure that North Koreans had perpetrated the abductions, and they worsened still more after the DPRK's missile and nuclear testing in 2006.

A few years ago, the Japanese government's Reconstruction and Collection Corporation (RCC) assumed responsibility for recovering the 62.8 billion yen (approximately \$531 million) that Chongryun had accrued in loans from North Korean-connected credit unions that began experiencing bankruptcy in the late 1990s. Chongryun, which did not dispute the debt amount, maintains that for some time negotiations were strictly business-like between the association and the RCC. But there was a dramatic change in 2005, when negotiations between Chongryun and the RCC turned noticeably political.

At the end of October 2005, former Prime Minister Koizumi appointed Abe, well known for his unflinching support for resolving the abduction issue, to the position of chief cabinet secretary. Less than a month later, the news broke that the RCC would be submitting a lawsuit to the Tokyo District Court to recover the debt owed by Chongryun.

Earlier this year, Chongryun knew that it had to take decisive action, lest it lose its headquarters. Chongryun officials became absolutely convinced that then-Prime Minister Abe was going for the jugular after the police raided its Tokyo offices in April. Calling the raids, which were pressed into action by the abduction issue, an "outrage" and a "political crackdown," Chongryun became even more suspect of the government's objectives. In a public statement Chongryun stressed: "The raids are an act of planned political oppression against Chongryun by the Japanese authorities that try to use the abduction issue politically ahead of Prime Minister Abe's visit to the United States."

Chongryun obviously saw the deal it made with Ogata as a way to save its headquarters from being taken over by the government. While Ogata and his associates certainly wanted to profit from the now-defunct purchase of Chongryun's headquarters, this does not necessarily mean that they had designed an elaborate scheme to take possession of the property worth 3.5 yen (or almost \$30 million) without ever paying for it - an accusation made by Tokyo that makes no sense. Indeed, Chongryun has continued to maintain that Ogata was not trying to defraud the association. Rather, it believes that Ogata, his past relationship with the association notwithstanding, came to understand that it is vitally important to Chongryun Koreans and that it still serves a purpose in Japan, especially given that Tokyo and Pyongyang do not have normal diplomatic relations.

Chongryun's math is simple and straightforward. Dominated in recent years by policies that have

manifested nationalist interests, the Japanese government wanted to make an example out of Ogata. Anyone attempting to help Chongryun will face a fate similar to the one experienced by Ogata.

Whether or not Ogata and his associates intended to cheat Chongryun is actually quite separate from the question of whether Chongryun and Chongryun Koreans, a minority in Japan that has long been subjected to oppressive and discriminatory treatment, have bore the political brunt of Tokyo's recent disagreements with Pyongyang on the nuclear, missile and especially the abduction issues. Should the fraud charges against Ogata pan out, this would indeed be a very rare instance where Japanese officials have come to the defense of Chongryun. However, either way, Chongryun's headquarters remains in jeopardy.

That Japanese nationalists have consistently pushed for a hard-line position toward North Korea, including in the ongoing six-party talks that were created in 2003 to settle the DPRK nuclear crisis, is certainly no secret. It is also no secret that not only had former Prime Minister Abe maintained this position but that he had been especially resolute in prioritizing the abduction issue in the policymaking process with respect to Pyongyang. More so than in the past, the Abe government made clear that significant movement on the abduction issue, which Pyongyang insists has already been settled, must occur before progress can be made on any other major matter with North Korea. Whether the new government headed by Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda, who is known to have more moderate views than his predecessor, will continue to pressure Chongryun remains to be seen.

III. Nautilus invites your responses

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: napsnet-reply@nautilus.org . Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

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