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## Freed From Captivity in Iraq, Japanese Return to More Pain

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After the hostages' families asked that the government yield to the kidnapers' demand and withdraw its 550 troops from southern Iraq, they began receiving hate mail and harassing faxes and e-mail messages. The Japanese, like the villagers in Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery," had to throw stones.

Even as the kidnapers were still threatening to burn alive the three hostages, Yukio Takeuchi, an official in the Foreign Ministry, said of the three, "When it comes to a matter of safety and life, I would like them to be aware of the basic principle of personal responsibility."

The Foreign Ministry, held both in awe and resentment by many Japanese, was the okami defied in this case.



Associated Press

Nahoko Takato and Noriaki Imai, two hostages freed by their Iraqi captors, arrived in Japan on Sunday and have gone into hiding.

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While Foreign Ministry officials are Japan's super elite, the average Japanese tends to regard them as arrogant and unhelpful, recalling how they failed to deliver in time the declaration of war against the United States in 1941 so that Japan became forever known as a sneak-attack nation.

Defying the okami are young Japanese people like the freed hostages, freelancers and members of nonprofit organizations, who are traditionally held in low esteem in a country where the bigger one's company, the bigger one's social rank. They also belong to a generation in which many have rejected traditional Japanese life. Many have gravitated instead to places like the East Village in Manhattan, looking for something undefined.

Others have gone to Iraq looking to report the true story, since Japan's big media outlets have generally avoided dangerous places. (Almost all of them left Iraq over the last week on a government-chartered plane, leaving Japan's most important military mission since the end of World War II essentially ignored by the news media.)

Mr. Yasuda — who was in the second group of hostages and also described the stress of his return as far greater than what he felt during his captivity in Iraq — quit his position as a staff reporter at a regional newspaper to report as a freelancer in Iraq.


"We have to check ourselves what the Japanese government is doing in Iraq," Mr. Yasuda said during an interview Thursday night. "This is the responsibility on the part of Japanese citizens, but it seems as if people are leaving everything up to the government."

The okami reacted with fury at such defiance. Some

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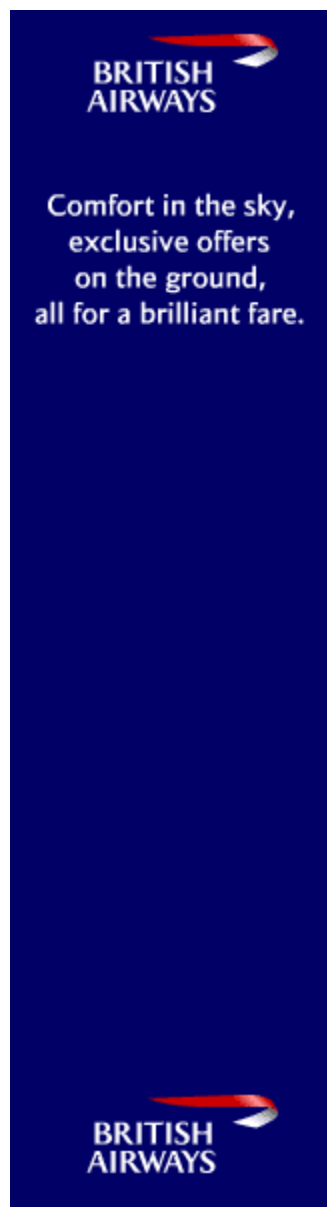
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politicians proposed a law barring Japanese from traveling to dangerous countries; even more of them said that the hostages should pay the costs incurred by the government in securing their release.

"This is an idea that should be considered," The Yomiuri Shimbun, Japan's biggest daily newspaper, said in an editorial. "Such an act might deter other reckless, self-righteous volunteers."

When two freed hostages mentioned wanting to stay or return to Iraq to continue their work, Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi angrily urged them "to have some sense."

"Many government officials made efforts to rescue them, without even eating and sleeping, and they are still saying that sort of thing?" he said.

The comment was revealing, one that would not likely be heard from the United States government. Here, the government is now trumpeting "personal responsibility" for those going to dangerous areas — essentially saying that travelers shouldn't expect any help from the government to secure their safety or get out of trouble.

Again, no Japanese politician dared to speak out against this idea.

Indeed, Mr. Koizumi's handling of the hostage crisis translated into positive evaluations in public opinion polls, and the issue diverted attention from Iraq's worsening security situation and the fact that Japan's troops, according to this country's war-renouncing Constitution, are supposed to be in a noncombat zone.

Grasping Japan's attitude toward them, the hostages found themselves under crushing pressure, Dr. Saito said.

According to him, Mr. Imai, the 18-year-old former hostage, registered a high blood pressure reading. Ms. Takato, who had a pulse rate of over 120 beats per minute, kept bursting into tears. When the doctor told her she had done good work in Iraq, she cried convulsively and said, "But I've done wrong, haven't I?"

Family members of Japanese citizens recently held hostage bowing to apologize for the trouble that the hostages had caused Japan. Their transgression was to ignore a government advisory against traveling to Iraq.

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On Tuesday, Ms. Takato used the tranquilizers Dr. Saito gave her and finally left Tokyo for her hometown in Hokkaido. Ms. Takato, the news media reported, expressed fear about returning to her family home, but she may as well have been talking about returning to Japan. "I feel like going back home quickly, but I'm also afraid of going home."

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