

Bouncing Back: Former Iraq hostage continues humanitarian battle

Matsumoto Chie

Takato Nahoko has an extraordinary ability to pick herself up again whatever blows life deals her—including being held captive in Iraq.

The former hostage of the Mujahideen Brigades in Fallujah has already resumed her volunteer work in the Middle East, this time as part of the effort to reconstruct a school in the town west of Baghdad where she was abducted for nine days in April along with freelance photojournalist Koriyama Soichiro and Imai Noriaki, who writes on depleted-uranium weapons issues.

While it's not quite a calling, Takato feels she left unfinished business in Iraq.

"I am determined to return," she says. "It almost feels like I left a kettle on the stove."

Though she hasn't yet set foot in Iraq again since her release, she returned to Amman, Jordan, for a month from the end of July to aid the Fallujah reconstruction effort. Between her April release and July, the 34-year-old aid worker helped establish the Iraq Hope Network, whose members include numerous Japanese volunteer groups and individuals, who share information and resources to enable more effective support.

With the help of local volunteers and nongovernmental organizations, the three former hostages and their families decided to contribute some of the 8 million yen in donations they received from benevolent Japanese to rebuild a school in Fallujah, she says. Creating jobs, especially for young men,

and schools to keep children occupied will help keep them away from militia recruitment and the violent anti-American movement, she explains.

Takato is recovering from post-traumatic stress disorder caused by her ordeal and still suffers from symptoms such as rashes, insomnia and palpitations. Her latest relapse occurred just before a news conference at the Foreign Correspondents Club of Japan in Tokyo's Chiyoda Ward last week. Though she seemed well and confidently explained the resumption of humanitarian aid work in Fallujah to a room full of journalists and television cameras, she says she still behaves like a recluse when in her hometown of Chitose, Hokkaido.

After her release, returning home, where she could hear the roar of fighter planes and the sound of cannon fire at the nearby Self-Defense Forces Chitose Air Base, was like reliving the war in Iraq, she says. Since her release, she has stayed at her parents' home no more than a week. She usually stays with friends.

Takato talks about her nightmarish ordeal, as well as disclosing details of the diary she has kept since visiting Iraq for the first time, in "Senso to Heiwa: Soredemo Iraku-jin o Kirai ni Narenai" (War and peace: Even they I can't hate the Iraqi people; Kodansha).

Since the book was published early last month, Takato and her family have received letters from people apologizing for criticizing her and misunderstanding her good intentions, she says. The senders were, of course, referring to the "personal responsibility" that the Japanese

government demanded from the hostages.

Although Takato says she has always been aware of the need to take responsibility upon entering war zones, she felt that she and the government didn't see eye to eye on exactly what "personal responsibility" meant. But she intends to repay the government for her ticket from Baghdad to Dubai as soon as her lawyers settle other issues with the Foreign Ministry.

People still wonder why Takato risked her life to help the street children of Iraq. Quite simply, she saw herself in those children, she said in an interview after the Tokyo news conference. The kids, some as young as elementary school age, smoking cigarettes and inhaling paint thinner from dawn until dusk, reminded her of her own youth.

As a child, Takato was a troublemaker who started smoking at 12, got hooked on paint thinner at 13 and soon afterward tried hashish.

It wasn't until she moved to metropolitan Tokyo to attend university that she began to get an idea of what she wanted to do with her life.

"I used to hate children," says Takato, who admits she often risked being stabbed with a butterfly knife when she managed a karaoke joint in Chitose that served as a hangout for juvenile delinquents.

But ever since she set off to India on her first humanitarian mission at age 30 to give herself a break from the day-to-day grind of working at

the karaoke club, she has found children in need of compassion and affection everywhere she has visited, including Cambodia, Thailand and Iraq. When she returns to Japan to earn travel expenses, she works at a ramen joint and at a cattle ranch.

Working abroad hasn't stopped Takato from contributing to her local community, where she has organized AIDS charity events, helped produce a recitation CD of her first book "Aishiterutte Do iu no?" (How do you say "I love you"?; Bungeisha, 2002) and published a quarterly town information magazine.

But now that she's suffering from flashbacks caused by the constant noise at the nearby air base, Takato is beginning to see her beloved birthplace in a different light.

"I feel even more awful back in my hometown," she says. There, she can hear the Self Defense Forces training people to kill while at the same time hearing blasts that are taking people's lives when she talks to Iraqi friends on the phone, she explains in tears.

"I wonder why fate put me in this painful position," she says.

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Matsumoto Chie is a contributing writer for the Asahi Shimbun.