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by J. Sean Curtin

BEIRUT -- The dramatic abduction of three Japanese civilians in Iraq -- hostage bargaining chips -- is reverberating throughout Japan, casting a long shadow over the future of Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi and his Iraq policy of dispatching troops on a humanitarian mission to help the United States there. It evokes memories of hostage-taking during Lebanon's civil war, cases that dragged on for years with scant progress and abundant tears.

Koizumi is facing his darkest hour, and as one of the US' closest allies, is coming under tremendous pressure to withdraw Japan's 550 troops from Iraq, a move that would further, and very significantly erode the already shaky credibility of the US-led coalition in Iraq. Japanese public opinion -- divided over dispatching troops in the first place -- currently is split over whether Japanese soldiers should quit Iraq. Meanwhile, Japanese and most other foreigners are fleeing Iraq en masse as the country descends into what some fear may become a Lebanese-style quagmire of hostage-taking.

To most Japanese, the sudden explosion of violence and hostage-taking has made their country's strictly humanitarian mission seem futile, since nearly all their troops are now tightly barricaded in a heavily protected fort about 10 kilometers outside the southern city of Samawah. Some commentators are even describing the current situation as Lebanon, Vietnam and the Palestinian intifada all rolled

into one.

Dr Pierre Serhal, a leading Beirut surgeon and son of a prominent lawmaker, is pessimistic about the hostage crisis. He believes that the foreign captives may be in for a protracted ordeal because US foreign policy is creating instability in the entire Middle East.

"From a Lebanese perspective, Iraq is turning into the same kind of hostage nightmare we had in Beirut during the 1980s," he told Asia Times Online. "I am very worried for the Japanese and other hostages, because I can only see things getting worse. I am a Christian, not a Muslim, but I feel American policy is a complete disaster for the whole region. The occupation of Iraq and the total neglect of any meaningful advances in the Israel-Palestine conflict are inflaming Arab opinion so much that it threatens the stability of every country in the region. Unless things radically change, there is little hope for the hostages, or indeed for the people who live here."

Hostage crisis dominates the Japanese media

The hostage drama is dominating the Japanese media with seemingly endless discussions about the crisis and its implications for Japan, the Japan-US alliance, Iraq, the Middle East and US foreign policy. Many recognize that its eventual outcome will probably determine not only Koizumi's future but also the future direction of the country's foreign policy. The stakes could not be higher. In the balance hangs the very nature of Japan's relationship with the US, the cohesion of the US-led alliance in Iraq, as well as Japan's own self-image and its status as a global player.

Iraq has been swept by a hostage-taking epidemic that apparently began last Thursday with the kidnapping of three Japanese citizens, Soichiro Koriyama of Tokyo and Noriaki Imai and Nahoko Takato, both from Hokkaido. The unlucky trio's pictures have been continually broadcast on Japanese TV, and their ordeal has given rise to unusually passionate political debate. They were captured by a gang calling itself Saraya al-Mujahideen (the Mujahideen Brigades), a previously unknown militant group, demanding the withdrawal of Japan's Ground Self-Defense Forces from Iraq.

Until the hostage crisis, the Japanese media had largely focused on the humanitarian aspects of Japan's military engagement in Samawah while carefully downplaying the terrible casualties suffered by US forces, especially the killing of four US contract workers and the mutilation and display of their corpses. Iraq had been portrayed as a country grateful for Japanese humanitarian aid, and now the Japanese population is bewildered by what seems Iraq's sudden transformation into a land of anarchy where foreigners are snatched by militants and held hostage, some of them for years.

Ryoji Yamauchi, a political commentator and president of Asahikawa University, says Japan is facing an important turning point. "The hostage crisis has already had far-reaching consequences, he told Asia Times Online. "It exposes the fiction that there are safe areas in Iraq where Japanese troops can conduct humanitarian activities. The entire country is a battlefield, which means our war-renouncing constitution should prohibit us from stationing troops there. The situation also demonstrates that because of the prime minister's obsession in forming the [US President George W] Bush-[British Prime Minister Tony] Blair-Koizumi trinity, Japan has become a terror target along with the US and Britain. Released Korean hostages say their captors repeatedly yelled, 'Kill the Americans, British and Japanese!'"

Yamauchi added, "It remains to be seen exactly how Japanese people will come to terms with these new realities. There will be increased public pressure for the troops to be withdrawn or at least relocated to a safer country like Kuwait or Jordan. However, Koizumi has made it clear that he does not intend to bow to such pressure, and this situation will force an intense public debate about the value of the US-Japan relationship and the price that must be paid for it. What the outcome of all this will be is impossible to predict because we simply have no idea how the hostage crisis will unfold, and because Koizumi has injected such a large dose of nationalism into mainstream Japanese politics that the way ordinary people view Japan's position in the global order is changing. It is quite conceivable that Japan will emerge from the crisis more nationalistic and assertive, or equally, it may revert to its former pacifist, less nationalist pre-Koizumi state."

Koizumi rejects "dirty threats" of terrorists

Since the crisis broke, Koizumi has adopted a tough stance, telling the nation, "We will not yield to the dirty threats of the terrorists." US Vice President Dick Cheney, who visited Japan on Saturday, praised Koizumi's resolve. "We wholeheartedly support the position that the prime minister has taken with respect to the question of Japanese hostages," Cheney said. Koizumi reassured Cheney, "Japan intends to keep its troops in Iraq."

The main opposition Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) has refrained from demanding a quick troop withdrawal, while strongly urging the government to take every possible measure to rescue the hostages. Its leader, Naoto Kan, has said, "The DPJ is ready to transcend the interests of the ruling and opposition parties to rescue the abducted Japanese."

Only two small opposition parties, the Japanese Communist Party (JCP) and the Social Democratic Party (SDP), have called for an

immediate troop pullout. Keiko Yamauchi, a former Lower House lawmaker for the SDP and one of its candidates in the July Upper House election said, "Koizumi is always talking about fighting terror, but what about the thousands of Iraqis who have died under US occupation? Isn't that also terror? Japan has renounced war, and we should have no part in this killing. Our troops should be withdrawn at once before we get sucked down further in this disaster along with the Americans."

An NHK opinion poll released on Monday, and conducted after the hostages were taken, showed that 53 percent of the public still supported Koizumi, just 1 percent less than in last month's poll, while 34 percent are opposed to his policies, down 3 percent. On the issue of withdrawing troops, a Kyodo News survey published on Saturday showed public opinion split on the issue; 43.5 percent said the troops should stay while 45.2 percent said they should withdraw. The same poll found 45.8 percent supported the government's troop dispatch to Iraq, while 45 percent said they opposed it. Alarming for the prime minister, more than 80 percent said he would be responsible if a Japanese citizen were to be injured in Iraq, but only 36 percent said he should resign if one is killed.

Public debate on the issue has been most intense in Hokkaido, Japan's northern island, home to two of the three hostages. The vast territory is also home to most of the Japanese troops deployed in Iraq. Kunio Sasaki, a Hokkaido politician for the opposition Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) said, "Like the rest of Japan, opinion here is evenly split on the issue of withdrawing the troops, but most people do agree that what the government needs to do is make every effort to ensure the safe return of the hostages."

Japanese exodus from the Middle East

Before the spree of hostage-taking began,

Japan had hoped to expand its already strong economic links in the Middle East, especially with Iran and Iraq. A Japanese consortium recently signed a US\$2 billion (215 billion yen) deal with Tehran to develop the enormous Azadegan oil field near the border with Iraq. However, immediately following the hostage-taking most Japanese companies began to scale down and relocate their nationals away from the region. Tokyo advised all Japanese citizens in the Middle East to be extra cautious. In Iraq, many Japanese citizens were airlifted to Kuwait on military C-130 cargo planes. Only about 550 Ground Self-Defense Force personnel now remain, holed up in their isolated fortress in southern Iraq.

A Japanese journalist with a major newspaper told Asia Times Online, "Since the hostages were taken, nearly all the Japanese media have left or are leaving Iraq. People just feel it is no longer safe to be here."

According to Yoshihiro, a journalist living in Cairo with his family, "The taking of Japanese hostages has already had a massive impact on the Japanese community in the Middle East," he said. "Many people who are stationed here are feeling anxious and want to leave."

Naoko Kochi, who was visiting Lebanon when the hostage story broke, said, "I rang my mother and she was very concerned for my safety. Like many Japanese, she cannot really distinguish between Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq or any other country in the Middle East. To most Japanese, all the countries in the Middle East are now considered to be extremely dangerous."

Nabil Harb, an elderly Beirut businessman who remained in Lebanon during its 17-year civil war, sees frightening parallels between the Lebanese hostage crisis and present-day Iraq. "The recent spate of hostage-taking in Iraq has striking similarities to the dark days we endured in Lebanon during the civil war," he

said. "The people of many countries were taken hostage and it took years to free some of them. What troubles me most is that today's Iraq seems even worse -- it's Lebanon, the intifada and Vietnam all rolled into one. Nobody knows how this terrible situation will end.

"For Japan and other countries whose people have been taken hostage, I can offer little comfort. If the Lebanese experience is any guide, negotiating the release of the hostages will be a painful and frustrating process. Little

progress will be made and many tears shed."

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