

Japanese Movement Calls for the Establishment of an Independent Committee to Inquire into the Iraq War

Background

It has been almost 7 years since the Iraq War broke out on March 20, 2003. According to the most conservative estimates, at least 150,000 people have since lost their lives and one in six Iraqis lives as a refugee or an internally displaced person, with many struggling to survive in extreme poverty conditions.

In Japan, former Prime Minister Koizumi's LDP administration open-handedly supported the US invasion, ignoring the fact that 80% of those polled showed their opposition to attacking Iraq. Japanese Self Defence Forces (SDF) were dispatched on a "humanitarian assistance" mission that included providing medical service and water supply from January 2004 to February 2009. Though Japan withdrew its ground forces from Iraq in July 2006, the Air SDF have continued airlifting US forces and strategic materials to and from Iraq. In a landmark ruling in April 2008, the Nagoya High Court ruled that the mission of the SDF" constitute[d] a violation of Clause 1, Article 9 of the Constitution that bans "the use of force."

The situations in the Netherlands and the UK

In the UK and in the Netherlands, independent committees were established to conduct an inquiry into the decision to support and participate in the invasion of Iraq and identify lessons that can be learned from the Iraq War.

The Dutch committee was set up in March 2009 and investigated the Dutch government's preparation for the war and decision-making processes. Its report concluded that the invasion of Iraq by the US and the UK was 'lacking legality under International Law' and the Dutch government's decision to approve this war 'cannot be justified'.

In the United Kingdom, a similar committee was set up in September 2009. On January 29, 2010, former Prime Minister Tony Blair was called to account for his administration's decision to invade Iraq along with US troops despite the largest anti-war demonstration since the Vietnam War taking place in London a month before the attack.

Recent Movement in Japan

Following the European examples, and seizing the momentum created by the change of the government from the LDP to the DPJ, a civil society network was created in Japan to call for an inquiry into the Iraq War. This was initiated by Ikeda Kayoko (translator / the Committee of Seven for World Peace), Taniyama Hiroshi (President, Japan International Volunteer Centre), Shiva Rei (freelance journalist), Takato Nahoko (Iraq Support Volunteer), with the support of eight Japanese NGOs including the Japan International Volunteer Center (JCV), the Japan Iraq Medical Support Network (JIM-Net), Human Rights Now, Peace Boat and YMCA Japan.

The Network's Takato Nahoko believes that Japan as a 'pacifist' and democratic country has the responsibility to scrutinize the government's decision to become involved in war without public consent. Regional teams have been formed in Hokkaido, Ishikawa, Tokyo, Nagoya, Osaka and Fukuoka; and new members are joining the movement everyday.

On December 20, 2009 a symposium entitled "What Was the Iraq War?" was held in Sapporo to discuss the former Prime Minister's support of the war and the dispatch of the SDF. Mr Taniyama from JCV explained that 5 million people were killed and 5.5 million

became refugees in Iraq; while 5 Japanese were killed, 7 SDF officers committed suicide and many continue to suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). 'As citizens of a country that contributed to this war we have responsibility' both as perpetrators and as victims. The symposium adopted a resolution requesting the government to set up an independent body to look into Japan's decision-making process and role in the Iraq war.

On December 25, 2009 NGOs submitted a letter to Prime Minister Hatoyama, Foreign Minister Okada and Defence Minister Kitazawa requesting the establishment of an independent inquiry committee to investigate the Iraq War.

The letter made the following four requests:

1. The government must set up a committee of inquiry to investigate the Japanese government's policy toward Iraq from the run-up to the war in 2003 to present.
2. The committee must meet the following conditions:
 - 1) It must be an independent third party body that is entitled to ask for information and carry out interviews
 - 2) Its inquiry process including discussions and reports must be made public
 - 3) Its members must not be those who gain from a particular outcome of the inquiry (must be interest-free or 'neutral')
3. The government must evaluate its Iraq policy on the basis of the result of this inquiry and publicize the outcome as an official government position.
4. Based on the result of the committee's inquiry and grasping the extent of the war damage to date, the government must devise an aid policy according to the true needs in Iraq.

On January 29, 2010 the network held a meeting at the House of Representatives building that was attended by 50 people including at least six politicians (five from the SDP and one from the DPJ), journalists, one of the lawyers involved in the Nagoya lawsuit, NGO members and other activists. Attendees first exchanged information on the precedents in the Netherlands and the UK and reaffirmed their commitment to setting up an Iraq Inquiry Committee in Japan.

During the meeting, artist Masuyama Rena said that Japanese taxpayers money is used to support the war in Iraq where ordinary mothers and children like herself and her child are enormously suffering because of the war. Freelance journalist and co-initiator of the network Shiva Rei explained that at least half a million Iraqis are refugees in overcrowded and unhygienic camps in Jordan but cannot go home because conditions are even more dangerous there.

The participants agreed that it is important that ordinary citizens have a platform to express their concerns. They concurred with the idea that Japanese NGOs should collaborate more with overseas NGOs, especially in the US, as on the Iraq issue as well as the issue of military bases. A series of events will take place throughout Japan in the coming months in order to garner more support for the cause.