

Koreans Under Assault From the Japanese Right

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This year's March First Day speech by South Korean president Roh Moo-hyun was reported on in Japan, as well. In Japan, the day was marked by a serious set of events surrounding a rally by Chongryun, or Chosen Soren, the pro-Pyongyang General Association of Korean Residents in Japan. The group's commemoration of Korea's March First, 1919 Independence Movement against Japanese colonization was to have been held in an outdoor theater in Hibiya Park on March 3. But the government of Tokyo, which had given the group a permit on January 25, suddenly changed its mind and revoked the permit on February 16. The reason it gave was that right-wing groups registered protests about the planned celebration with the government, saying that Tokyo should not grant permission to a group associated with North Korea to hold a public assembly when North Korea has abducted Japanese citizens. Supposedly, the authorities were worried about an opposing protest and could not guarantee the safety of participants.



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On February 28, the Tokyo District Court sided with Chongryun and recognized the group's right to hold an assembly at the stated location. Tokyo protested and went to a higher court, but its appeal was rejected.

I took relief in the fact the group was eventually permitted to use the location and that the Japanese court system exercised good judgment. The right to assemble is one of the foundations of democracy, so we must not deny it by giving in to rightist threats.

But the situation is an especially serious one

when you think of how Tokyo authorities arrived at their decision. Ever since the 2002 summit between then-prime minister Koizumi Junichiro and North Korean leader Kim Jong Il, during which Kim acknowledged the abduction of Japanese citizens by North Korean operatives, Japanese society has considered the abductions a "state crime" by North Korea, and there has been a tendency to consider everything related to the North, whether directly or indirectly, as a form of evil. Harassment of students from North Korean schools, who are identifiable by their distinctive uniforms, has occurred before, but recently government authorities and the police have been targeting Chongryun or other Koreans in Japan for minor issues and engaging in arrests and house searches. There has been a noticeable increase in such incidents. Recent comments by the police commissioner give strong reason to suspect that it is more a project than an investigation, one intended to corner North Korea.



Students at a Korean School in Japan

The Tokyo Metropolitan Government, led by governor Ishihara Shintaro, has been pressuring the Edagawa Korean School. The school stands where there was once a garbage incinerator. Koreans were moved there forcibly and began the school entirely with their own means, in an area the postwar government had completely given up on. Then, in December

2003, the government sued the school, saying it was using its land illegally and should pay a fine of 400 million Yen (US\$3.38 million) and evacuate the premises. Instead of guaranteeing the right to ethnic education in accordance with global standards and common sense, Tokyo is trying to ruin a school that is educating more than 60 children while ignoring the historical circumstances as well as its own responsibility.

Ever since the North Korean abduction cases became public knowledge, Japanese government authorities have been increasingly the attack as well, and it is not just so-called "right-wing elements" anymore. Chongryun's March First Day observances were to include a protest against this trend, calling on the national government to withdraw its decision to prohibit the North Korean ship Mangyongbong from docking in Japan, as well as calls to protect the rights of Koreans in Japan. It was in this context that the public assembly permit was canceled, and the move in and of itself is enough to force one to wonder if it was very politically motivated.

The court, on the other hand, is protecting the right to assemble, going against this trend. But I feel even better because of the fact that when the decision to cancel the assembly permit hit the news, people protested with telephone calls and faxes. Koreans associated with South Korea and North Korea are working together with Japanese lawyers to protect the Edagawa Korean School. On March 8 the Tokyo District Court was host to a reconciliation with the metropolitan government that essentially spelled victory for the school, which will have to pay 170 million Yen for the 4,100 sq. meters of land, and will not have to leave. This is an accomplishment in the name of solidarity.

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