

Are Self-Defense Force Soldiers Pawns to be Sacrificed?

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by Yoshida Toshihiru

Written on the eve of Japan's dispatch of Self-Defense Forces (army) to Iraq, a major step in the erosion of the peace constitution, this article examines three issues central to understanding the contemporary Japanese military and society. The first of these is the question of the willingness of SDF forces to go to Iraq at a time when strong opposition to its dispatch surfaced in Japanese society. Based on questionnaires and interviews with SDF personnel, the article examines SDF views concerning deployment to Iraq as well as constitutional issues. The second is the nature of the movement seeking to elicit opinions and support resistance to the dispatch to Iraq, from within the ranks of the SDF. This may be viewed as a successor to the Vietnam-era movement that supported GI resistance among US troops stationed in Okinawa and Japan. The third is the existence of serious problems within the SDF, particularly bullying of recruits and suicides that have soared in recent years. This article appeared in the November, 2004 issue of Sekai (World), pp. 47-54. Posted at Japan Focus on February 15, 2005.

Self-Defense Force soldiers are about to be sent to Iraq where chaos continues. Society is being transformed in ways that slights individual lives and human rights compared with the nation.

Appeal to Self-Defense Force Soldiers and their Families

In Iraq, anger over the occupation has increased and resistance to the American military has grown. America has been brought to a standstill over its occupation policy. In order to reduce its burden, it has strongly pressured various countries to pay a portion of the enormous sums for reconstruction (the costs of occupation) and the deployment of troops. Although reluctant to deploy the Self-Defense Force (SDF), Japanese officials hurriedly dispatched a fact-finding mission to Iraq. This led to troop deployment after American officials warned them not to try to avoid participation. The government and its ruling party can do nothing but trail in the footsteps of America.

There are U.S. Navy and Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force bases in Yokosuka City, Kanagawa Prefecture. On Sunday July 27, 2003 peace activists from all over the prefecture rallied in front of the Keihin Kyuko central train station in Yokosuka. Groups such as Citizens for a Nuclear-Free Yokosuka established an organization called SDF Soldiers and Citizens Hotline (tel:0468-25-0157). Members announced their opposition to the deployment of SDF personnel to Iraq and issued an appeal to soldiers and their families:

"Soldiers and families, we think that the situation into which you have been placed is grave. The rebellion against American and British occupation forces has intensified and the deaths of American soldiers follow one after another. Many Iraqi people have also been killed by U.S. forces. Prime Minister Koizumi's response to the Diet was irresponsible: 'We don't know where non-combat zones are.' Have any soldiers' voices been taken into

consideration while the government creates a law that will force soldiers to risk their lives in overseas battlefields?

"We don't want soldiers to be killed in Iraq or to kill Iraqis. Soldiers' voices are crucial at this moment. Please tell us your doubts and concerns. We want to send your message to society. A single soldier's voice might be small, but we believe that by collecting many of these small voices, we can create a force that will stop the troop deployment."

This group distributed fliers with their appeal along with questionnaires and return envelopes which could be anonymously returned. The questionnaires contained five questions:

1. Do you think that soldiers' feelings and the situation at their destination are taken into consideration in the debate over legislation concerning troop deployments to Iraq?
2. In the new law concerning Iraq, Self-Defense Forces are expected to join the occupation force. Did you expect to participate in the occupation of a foreign country when you joined SDF?
3. What was your purpose for joining the SDF? (multiple answers are acceptable)
4. What do you think is the importance of your job as an SDF soldier? (multiple answers are acceptable)
5. If you are concerned about your duties or your treatment as a SDF soldier, is there anywhere that you can find help?

Passers by included SDF soldiers, cadets of the Defense Academy and some female SDF personnel, all in uniform. But very few of them picked up the questionnaires. Perhaps they were being cautious about their behavior in public. However, later that day, young soldiers and cadets were seen along the street or on pedestrian bridges, listening seriously to the

appeals by demonstrators.

SDF soldiers' lives are protected under Article IX of the Constitution

Questionnaires were hand-delivered in advance to the mailboxes of 2400 SDF residences prior to this date by members of the group called SDF Soldiers and Citizen Hotline. About 100 more were passed out at the demonstration. The results of this survey was announced on August 20, 2003. A total of 21 questionnaires was returned, including eight blank forms and one with remarks only. Out of twelve responses that answered the questions, seven were from the Maritime SDF, two from the Ground SDF and three were unknown. There was only one reply from a female soldier. The ages of these soldiers were as follows: two in their twenties, five in their thirties, two in their forties, one in their fifties and two unknown. The following are answers to each question:

1. In the debate over the new law concerning Iraq, SDF soldiers' feelings are
 - "taken into consideration" - 1
 - "not fully taken into consideration" - 5
 - "not taken into consideration at all" - 4
 - "Others" - 1
 - "No answer" - 1
2. Did you expect that SDF would participate in a troop deployment to occupy a foreign country?
 - "Yes, I expected that." - 2
 - "No, I didn't expect that." - 6
 - "Others" - 2
 - "No answer" - 2
3. The reason that I became a SDF soldier is
 - "to protect my countrymen" - 6
 - "to protect my country" - 4
 - "to protect peace in Asia" - 0
 - "to protect peace in the world" - 2
 - "to be allied with America" - 0
 - "to engage in rescue mission in disaster" - 2
 - "Others" - 1
 - "No answer" - 2

4. The most important thing for SDF personnel is

- "to protect Article IX of the Constitution" - 1
 - "to protect the three non-nuclear principles" - 2
 - "to protect exclusively defense-oriented policy" - 2
 - "not to send a troop to oversea" - 0
 - "not to exercise right to collective defense" - 0
 - "to strengthen alliance with America" - 3
 - "to be accepted as a national military" - 4
 - "Others" - 6
 - "No answer" - 1
5. Places to seek help
- "exist" - 8 (supervisor - 1, colleagues - 3, family - 3, others - 2)
 - "don't exist" - 1
 - "No answer" - 3

Mr. Niikura Yuji of Citizens for a Nuclear Free Yokosuka has been calling for the removal of all bases since 1976. He commented on the result of these questionnaires.

"The response rate of about 1% is low. Still, given that SDF soldiers have provided valuable feedback to peace activists, this survey has great significance.

"3/4 of the responses claimed that SDF soldiers' feelings were not taken into consideration in the debate over legislation concerning Iraq. Also half of the respondents indicated that they didn't expect to be compelled to join in the occupation of a foreign land. These two results clearly reveal that SDF personnel's feelings are ignored in the process of creating a system to justify their death in war and to force them into unexpected duties. We consider this a very serious matter."

The questionnaires had a section for remarks. The following remarks were recorded:

"It would be ideal if I could only work in a peaceful Japan. But I am convinced that I will get more overseas assignments from now on."

"We are merely pieces in a board game. If we are told to go, we 'have no choice but to go. In

Japan, we're the Self-Defense Force. But in the world of diplomacy, we're obviously an army."

"It is strange to be obsessed with Article IX (of the Constitution) alone. Nobody likes combat. Moreover, nobody teaches us to kill people. I want people to know that our main mission is to protect our nation, countrymen and their families from danger."

"If your group is so motivated to engage in this kind of activity, I urge you to go to North Korea and start an anti-nuclear movement there."

"There are many harsh criticisms of us, but we need to listen to the candid opinions of these SDF soldiers. I'd like to use the opinions to open a dialogue with them. I hope that we can think together about how to create nuclear-free zones in Asia, including North Korea," said Mr. Niikura.

He continued with passion, "I also want SDF people to realize that Article IX of the Constitution should, in fact, keep them from being sent to a combat zone and losing their lives. I want them to recognize the power of peace with which Article IX is endowed. If they see this, they will know that there should never be a world in which the death of an SDF soldier is seen as a matter of course. We'd like to send the results of this survey along with our comments to SDF soldiers, military authorities and the government."

Do you want them to bleed?

The Defense Agency and SDF hierarchy are nervous about the deployment to Iraq, and have ordered SDF soldiers not to talk to the press.

However, Prime Minister Koizumi mentioned at the Diet, "There is a possibility that SDF soldiers, if attacked, will be killed. Also we cannot deny the possibility that they may kill an attacker." As this comment suggests, deployment to Iraq will probably be a hellish situation. That is precisely why it is so

unreasonable that participants can't comment freely.

In order to write this article, I requested an interview with officials at the Defense Agency. My request was turned down because every section involved was said to be too busy. I managed to interview three Ground Self-Defense Force soldiers on condition that their names not be revealed. A, a PFC in his late 20's, started talking in bewilderment.

"I'm so tied up with intensive training and exercises that I can't afford to think about the deployment to Iraq. I'm skeptical that it is possible to only engage in logistical support in a secure area. If ordered to deploy, I will be worried and when I think about combat, I get scared. But right now without any actual deployment order, I can't even imagine how I will react."

B who is a Corporal in his early 30's said, "I still don't feel this whole thing is my personal issue. I haven't gotten an order to deploy yet. But my wife and my mother are worried about it, saying 'We never imagined that you might be sent to a battlefield in a foreign country.' I don't think we will be in a serious situation in Iraq this time, but I have a feeling that in a couple of years there will come a day when we will be sent into combat. SDF soldiers and their families will need to seriously think about this possibility in the future."

B's mother described her fear in the following way: "I asked my son 'Why are you going to a place like Iraq? Killing people in another country means that you may get killed, too. This is far from what you always say is the SDF mission, to protect Japan.'" My son replied with this complicated justification: 'I must go as long as we have the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty.' I continued 'I want you to quit a job that will make your wife and children cry.' But my son has such a strong sense of responsibility that he wouldn't be able to do such a thing. I don't know what to do and now there are nights

when I can't sleep."

C who is a Master Sergeant in his early 40's gave a very substantial comment about the deployment to Iraq.

"I think that Prime Minister Koizumi and Defense Agency Director General Ishiba as well as executive officers of SDF want to make SDF soldiers bleed at least once in a foreign land. The SDF has been sent to Cambodia as a peacekeeping force but had no casualties. The U.S. has been saying that Japan contributes money and sweat to the international arena but never blood. So, people like Prime Minister Koizumi want to show them that Japan can overcome this reputation and be just like the U.S. Also, this may be a good opportunity to make the SDF and people of Japan get used to the fact that casualties of war are inevitable in a military operation. They seem to treat us as if we are a human sacrifice.

"This logic is ridiculous. Those who will be in the field can't stand such thinking. This is also a deviation from the principle of an exclusively defense-oriented policy. I feel as if we, the SDF soldiers, are exploited as a tool for the ambitions of politicians. I want to tell Prime Minister Koizumi and Director General Ishiba themselves to go to Iraq. This is what we soldiers discuss among ourselves."

C spoke in an assertive tone. But he also took pride in his SDF job that he'd held for more than 20 years and for which he was awarded a Ranger badge after severe training. He confessed his internal conflict saying "I don't want to, but I have no choice but to go once I get the order."

"When we joined, we took an oath: In the face of crisis, we shall strive to completely accomplish our duties even if it means putting ourselves at risk. If I am asked whether I want to go or not, I can't choose not to go. I feel as if I would deny my whole career if I chose not to go. I do worry about my family's reaction and

get torn apart. Also, if I refuse to obey an order, I'm sure even my men would get a cold look from the people around me and be treated as the subordinates of a coward. It would affect their promotion. I wish that I was at least trusted by the Japanese people, but many oppose this deployment."

To refuse an unreasonable assignment based on conscience

SDF soldiers and their families who are skeptical and afraid of the deployment to Iraq face the difficult question of whether it is possible to refuse an order to deploy.

"U.S. and SDF Soldiers' Human Rights Hotline" (tel:03-3369-3977) is one of the citizen' groups that listen to soldiers' concerns. At the end of August 2003, this group was consulted by one SDF soldier's family, asking if he would be punished if he refused to follow orders for deployment to Iraq.

The secretariat of this group explained it this way: "In the SDF, soldiers are offered three choices (accept with eagerness, accept willingly, do not accept willingly) before officially receiving an order to deploy overseas. An official order is sent only to those who choose 'accept with eagerness' and 'accept willingly.' In terms of punishment for not following an order, there are only two binding orders that the SDF must follow - deployment for defense and deployment for restoring order. Overseas deployment falls under a miscellaneous section of SDF Law. It means that an assignment such as this is carried out only when it does not interfere with their main missions. Therefore, to refuse or decline such an assignment should not be punished."

Mr. Kataoka Kenji, assistant secretary-general of the group commented, "Those who plan a war are only giving orders from a safe area, while those who are actually involved in killing or suffering from wounds and agony are soldiers -- in other words, ordinary people.

Soldiers are basically ordinary people in uniform. There should be no reason why they have to go overseas and fight against other local soldiers and people.

"The Japanese Government is pushing to regularize overseas deployment of SDF soldiers. It is also planning to create a permanent law for overseas deployment. If such a permanent law can be established, overseas deployment will be legitimized as a binding assignment. SDF soldiers and their families may not have a clear understanding of combat, but government policies are steadily advancing toward battlefield deployment. Their intention is to extend the notion of collective defense and clear the way for a constitutional amendment."

One of representative, Ms. Ishida Momo, added, "The invasion and occupation of Iraq by U.S. and British forces are in violation of the U.N. Charter and International Law. It is righteous for SDF soldiers, who are basically citizens in uniform, to refuse, in accordance with their conscience, to accept an unreasonable assignment in supporting such occupation forces. Their refusal is not only to protect their own lives and human rights, but also to refuse to hurt and kill local people."

The hotline had received no inquiries from SDF soldiers themselves as of the middle of September, perhaps due to a lack of awareness of the hotline. Members of the hotline are prepared for counseling and to address legal questions. They plan to expand the network throughout the country.

Bullying and suicide

Activists for SDF soldiers and their families are paying close attention to SDF-related human rights issues such as bullying and harsh training in addition to the issue of deployment to Iraq. Incidents involving bullying and harsh training in the SDF have been reported

frequently. Last year, an incident of arson as a result of bullying occurred on board the Umigiri, a transport ship home ported in Yokosuka. Citizens for a Nuclear-Free Yokosuka called for a complete investigation into this incident and for the elimination of bullying.

This incident involves Head Seaman T who had been bullied by his senior with accusations about work, kicking and beating. At the trial, it was revealed that Head Seaman T set fire to a blanket in his room out of frustration over his situation. He received a sentence of one year and six months in prison and a four-year suspended sentence for property destruction. The senior soldier who was accused of bullying him was punished with a reduction in pay (one tenth of his regular salary for one month).

Mr. Niikura of Citizens for a Nuclear Free Yokosuka expressed a sense of urgency: "The Ground Staff Office (GSO) talked with us, asserting that the SDF never encouraged violent behavior as a part of training. But the report of the investigation into the Umigiri incident indicated that the SDF did use physical discipline to force each soldier to complete his mission in dangerous situations. In that incident, a senior soldier admitted that he sometimes resorted to violence. We are concerned that 'training through violence' will become more common as it becomes necessary for soldiers to learn with their bodies as they move closer to actual combat."

Mr. Imagawa Masami, a Social Democratic Party member of the Security Committee of the House of Representatives, and active in human rights issues concerning SDF soldiers, made this comment:

"New legislation about Iraq demonstrates that this country is moving quickly toward a system and a military that are capable of fighting in a war. Now, the time has come for SDF soldiers, whether they like it or not, to risk their lives. Training gets more and more severe; anxiety and stress to the body and mind are increasing.

"The existence of the SDF itself is unconstitutional, and the human rights of its members must be protected. But the fact is that bullying and harsh training takes place continuously in the framework of junior/senior relations. The organization is so closed that sometimes a psychologically oppressed soldier kills himself."

The number of suicides among SDF soldiers in the four months between April and the end of July this year reached thirty-one, and it is likely to surpass the record breaking number of thirty-eight last year.

According to a report by the Defense Agency, there have been 601 suicides in the last ten years. It has doubled compared to the 1970's when there were 20 to 30 a year. In the five years between 1998 and 2002, there were a total of 347 suicides (219 in the Ground SDF, 73 in the Maritime SDF and 55 in the Air SDF). Government officials classify as 28 due to sickness, 84 for debt, 32 over family matters, 39 over work situations and 164 for unknown reasons.

The Defense Agency considers this to be a very serious issue and has taken measures such as establishing a counseling office on base, bringing in outside counselors and commissioning telephone counseling from outside expert organizations. These measures, however, may not prevent suicide if they fail to eliminate bullying based on junior/senior relations on base.

Do not make soldiers disposable

At the Sasebo Branch of the Nagasaki District Court, a trial is underway to investigate national accountability concerning bullying and suicide in the SDF.

On November 8, 1999, on board the Sawagiri, a transport ship home ported in Sasebo, Petty Officer 2nd Class H committed suicide by hanging. His parents sued, claiming that their son's suicide was a result of bullying by his

seniors. The plaintiff is demanding an investigation into the root cause, as well as an apology, monetary compensation and the establishment of a military ombudsman system.

Having a long-time dream of joining the SDF and a desire to serve society, Petty Officer H reported to the Sasebo training camp of the Maritime SDF as a candidate for general petty officer after graduating from high school in Miyazaki Prefecture. He was assigned to the engineering section of the Sawagiri in March of 1999. He was married with a one year-old son. Why did Petty Officer H, with such a background, end his life on his 21st birthday aboard the Sawagiri during a Pacific exercise?

His mother had an explanation. "Around September of that year, my son started to confide that two leaders in the engineering section were bullying him. They ordered him to do tasks that he had never learned in front of everyone. When my son obviously couldn't do them, they jeered: 'You're so stupid!' 'You don't deserve 2nd Class rank.' 'You're useless.' He was really depressed. But why did he have to suffer alone until he killed himself? I want to know what actually happened."

According to a report by an investigation committee from the SDF, Petty Officer H, during his last tour, was complaining that he could not sleep or concentrate and that there was no place that he could feel at home. On the morning of his suicide, his colleagues found him in a shaft room, preparing to hang himself with a rope in his right hand. He left the room when his colleagues started to talk to him. One of them found him in front of the medical room and he was told not to think about such a ridiculous thing. They parted, and about one hour later he was found hung in the shaft room. He received resuscitation but was not saved.

The report concludes that it was obvious that Petty Officer H committed suicide after being oppressed psychologically and depressed because of bullying. The SDF took no action,

failing in their responsibility to provide safety measures. On the contrary, the country, which is the defendant in this case, argued based on a Defense Agency report that bullying could not be proven and that the suicide was solely the result of his personal conflict over his lack of capability. His words and behavior were not serious enough to suggest a suicide, so the SDF had no responsibility to take preventative measures.

However, the SDF report was mainly based on interviews with the crew aboard ship. Testimony by Petty Officer H's family was not included. Every aspect of the case was decided in favor of the SDF. There is no basis for ruling out completely the possibility of bullying, nor is it fair to conclude that Petty Officer H was incapable on the basis of the evaluation of the section chief who was one of the participants in the bullying. Moreover, much information in the report has been whited out -- obscured -- in the name of privacy.

Some of the comments by the crew in the report differ from what they said the day after the suicide and to Petty Officer H's family at his wake. Also, four pages are missing from two notebooks in which Petty Officer H might have left his last words. These were reportedly removed with a cutter, yet there seems to be no investigation about that. There are suspicious points in this case.

The strange thing is that in the engineering section of the Sawagiri, in a period of a year and a half, there were two suicide attempts and one missing crew member case in addition to Petty Officer H's suicide. This indicates that there are some serious issues in this section.

After all, investigations within an organization are limited by institutional biases. In order to eliminate bullying and protect the human rights of SDF soldiers, it is necessary to introduce a military ombudsman system that reports to the Diet and is authorized to conduct investigations, as in the German system.

Petty Officer H's mother appealed, "I feel so sorry for my son when I think about this whole thing. He was so full of hope when he joined the SDF, but soon he was heartbroken. Even his suicide is being dismissed as a result of his own weakness and incapability. I will continue to seek the truth and call for government accountability so that such a thing will never happen again."

In an organization that does not protect human rights in everyday life, there will certainly be no protection of rights in times of crisis. If human rights are neglected within an organization, they will be neglected for ordinary people. A country is no exception.

Petty Officer H's mother mentioned a disturbing incident. While watching NHK's "Sunday Debate" (aired on June 8, 2003) she heard the following comment from Mr. Yamazaki Taku, a leading LDP promoter of the deployment of the SDF to Iraq. "Since we have this human resource called the SDF and spend an enormous amount of money to sustain it, it's a shame not to use it to contribute to our international relations."

She talked about her feelings. "Resource refers to something that we consume. So it is strange to use such a word for human beings. I think this comment shows that he thinks that SDF soldiers are disposable." Through the painful experience of losing a son, she acquired a sense of the truth that lies behind words. In Mr. Yamazaki's comments, she recognized that the Koizumi regime is unable to hide its lack of

concern with human life.

Mr. Imagawa discussed his concern, "Since the SDF has problems of harsh training, bullying, psychological and physical deterioration to the extent of neurosis and eventually suicide, the era of 'the disposable SDF' has already begun. Deployment to Iraq is likely to fuel this problem."

He also pointed out, "It is quite interesting that LDP members who encourage deployment of the SDF pay lip service to them, but show almost no interest in issues concerning their human rights such as bullying and suicide."

With the passage of new legislation, the government is preparing to designate medical, construction and transportation (land, ship, air and port) workers as a target group that may be called up under Article 103 of the SDF Law in case of an armed attack. Plans for mobilization orders during wartime are taking shape step by step.

Doesn't this suggest that we are becoming a militarized nation, on a path in which society values the nation over human rights and the life of the individual? No one should be disposable.

Now is the time to persuade people not to deploy the SDF to Iraq.

Translation for Japan Focus by Atsuko and Christopher Nelson.