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North Korea's Kidnappers and the Fate of David Sneddon

Pyongyang has admitted abducting Japanese citizens. Was a missing Brigham Young student also seized?

By MELANIE KIRKPATRICK

North Korea's recent bellicosity seems to have subsided for the moment, but the regime's malign practices continue. The United Nations Human Rights Council last month established an international commission of inquiry into what it describes as North Korea's "systematic, widespread and grave violations of human rights." The commission's mandate includes examining North Korea's abductions of foreigners and the likelihood that some victims are imprisoned in the North. Pyongyang is believed to have kidnapped nationals of at least 12 countries.

One such victim may be an American citizen. David Sneddon disappeared in China in August 2004, when he was a 24-year-old student at Brigham Young University. He was vacationing in Yunnan Province after completing several months of study at Beijing International University and before returning to the U.S. for his senior year. Speaking in Tokyo last month about Mr. Sneddon's disappearance, Keiji Furuya, Japanese minister of state for the abduction issue, told me: "It is most probable that a U.S. national has been abducted to North Korea."



Associated Press

North Korean army Col. Kim Chang Jun on a hilltop overlooking the demilitarized zone which separates the two Koreas.

The charge that an American citizen was likely kidnapped by North Korea is noteworthy in and of itself. It is even more so coming from a cabinet-rank member of the Japanese government about a citizen of another country. The minister added: "I would not like to speak further about it because it would be an intervention in the domestic affairs of the United States."

Japan is in a unique position to evaluate North Korea's kidnapping operation, having investigated it for more than 30 years. North

Korean agents infiltrated Japan in the 1970s and 1980s, snatched Japanese citizens and took them back to North Korea. Japanese traveling in Europe were also kidnapped. North Korea forced the abductees to teach Japanese language and customs at its spy schools so that its agents could travel the world posing as Japanese nationals.

In 2002, the late dictator Kim Jong Il admitted to the visiting Japanese prime minister, Junichiro Koizumi, that North Korea had kidnapped 13 Japanese citizens. Kim did so in the expectation that his confession would pave the way for the normalization of relations with Japan. The move could have had the salutary effect for North Korea of attracting Japanese investment and reducing North Korea's economic dependence on China. Instead, Kim's confession inflamed Japanese public opinion and made normalization impossible.

North Korea allowed five of the abductees to go home. It said the other eight victims had died, but the death certificates supplied by Pyongyang were found to be fake. Japan believes those eight victims—as well as others whom Kim Jong Il did not acknowledge—are alive in North Korea.

In recent years, Pyongyang's kidnappers have turned their attention to China, where they have abducted South Korean humanitarian workers. The South Koreans were targeted because of their work helping North Koreans escape on an underground railroad across China to eventual sanctuary in Seoul.

This brings us back to David Sneddon. In addition to speaking Chinese, Mr. Sneddon is fluent in Korean, having spent two years in South Korea as a Mormon missionary. This unusual linguistic ability may have thrown suspicion on him. The Sneddon family believes that David was kidnapped by North Korean agents who mistakenly thought he was helping North Korean defectors. Yunnan Province, which borders Laos, Burma and Vietnam, is along the underground railroad's usual route out of China. North Korean security agents are known to operate there, apparently with Beijing's permission.

At the time of David's disappearance in August 2004, China told the Sneddon family that its investigation had concluded that the young man likely had a fatal mishap while hiking through Tiger Leap Gorge. That theory was disproved by facts uncovered by David's father and two of his brothers three weeks after he went missing. The three Sneddons retraced the young man's steps in Yunnan and found witnesses who reported seeing him during and after his hike through the gorge.

The Sneddons have had their share of frustrations in dealing with the U.S. State Department. A senior diplomat wrote the family last year that "Under the Privacy Act, we are not permitted to release any information about David's case unless we have his written consent to do so." The diplomat noted a health-or-safety exception but only if the family "has convincing information as to where the U.S. citizen is located or what his/her condition may be."

"We're living a Catch-22," says David's brother, Michael Sneddon. "If our family had 'convincing information' as to David's whereabouts, David would no longer be missing. It's absurd." The Washington-based Committee for Human Rights in North Korea plans to file a Freedom of Information Act request for information on actions the State Department has taken on the Sneddon case, says executive director Greg Scarlatou.

The Sneddens refute speculation that David may have disappeared voluntarily. He had purchased a plane ticket home, put a down payment on his student housing for the fall semester, and made arrangements to take the LSAT exam for entry to law school. His Beijing roommate, who traveled with him until a few days before his disappearance, says David was planning to go home.

Last year, a Tokyo-based research organization published a report citing new evidence that North Korea kidnapped Mr. Sneddon. A source in China told the National Association for the Rescue of Japanese Abducted by North Korea that in August 2004—the date of his disappearance—Yunnan provincial police arrested an American university student who was helping North Korean refugees. A second Chinese source told the Japanese researchers that the Yunnan police handed over the American to North Korean security agents. In both cases, personal details about the unnamed student correspond with facts known about David Sneddon. Seven Japanese parliamentarians traveled to Washington last May to present this evidence to the State Department and Congress.

For one former Japanese intelligence official, the Sneddon disappearance is a case of déjà vu. The official, who asked not to be identified by name, compares it to the abduction cases he tracked in the 1970s and 1980s. "The evidence is always fragmented and isolated," he says. Until Kim Jong Il confessed to kidnapping 13 Japanese citizens, he notes, some in the Japanese government refused to acknowledge the abductions for fear of alienating Pyongyang. The former intelligence official has looked at the Sneddon evidence and believes there is a strong possibility that North Korea kidnapped the American.

The U.N. commission of inquiry will spend one year gathering and evaluating information on North Korea's abductions. Let's hope it discovers what happened to all those who disappeared—including the American David Sneddon.

Ms. Kirkpatrick, a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute, is the author of "Escape From North Korea: The Untold Story of Asia's Underground Railroad" (Encounter Books, 2012).

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