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Japan Needs to Establish National Crisis Management System to Protect Own Nationals from Terrorism

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Ten Japanese citizens engaged in the construction of a gas refinery were killed in the Algerian hostage crisis of January 29, 2013, one of a large number of incidents overseas in which Japanese nationals have fallen victim to terrorism. Ten Japanese tourists were also killed by a terrorist attack in Luxor (November 17, 1997), 24 Japanese businessmen died in the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in New York, and Japanese diplomats, journalists, and NGO personnel have been killed in still other terrorist attacks. Almost all of these cases have been terrorist raids with little leeway for negotiation, but there have also been terrorist kidnappings where hostages were freed after negotiations.

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Additionally, there have been terrorist hijackings of passenger aircraft. The typical incident involves the terrorists bringing aboard concealed weapons and explosives, mixing in among the passengers, taking the passengers and crew hostage, and making demands to be taken to a particular destination, to have comrades released, or to be paid ransom. One such incident involving many Japanese nationals was the Dhaka hijacking (September 28, 1977) by the Red Army Faction. The Japanese government managed to have the kidnapped passengers released by fully complying with the terrorists' demands through extralegal measures on the principle that "human life outweighs the earth." The freed Red Army Faction members were involved in many subsequent terrorist attacks, bringing derision on Japan from the rest of the world.

Many Japanese believe they are immune from terrorism and face few security problems inside Japan, but they are mistaken. The Subway Sarin Incident (March 20, 1995), as it is termed in Japan, is known in the international community as the Tokyo Sarin Gas Attack. This attack, in which dangerous military-grade nerve gas was secretly produced in a laboratory in Japan and released on public transport (subway trains), was the world's first fully-fledged large-scale chemical terrorist attack.

The latest statistics show that the number of Japanese nationals residing overseas has steadily risen to approximately 1.18 million (780,000 long-term residents and 400,000 permanent residents), and that the number of elderly overseas travelers has also grown. Consequently, the recent Algerian hostage crisis should prompt a re-examination of measures to enhance the safety of Japanese residing overseas. Firmer measures for dealing with raids, kidnappings and hijackings can be considered in five stages – envisioning the dangers; arranging means of contact, equipment and facilities; detecting signs of danger; avoiding the dangers if possible; and calmly dealing with any incidents that occur – and at the individual, company and national level.

Individuals at a minimum should carefully read and understand the precautions posted on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' overseas safety website, and companies should maintain regular communications and contact (including email and video communications by social media) with local government and

police officials as well as Japanese diplomatic and consular offices and should conduct crisis management simulations and training.

Even so, there are limits to the preparations that can be taken at the individual and company level. There are many shortcomings in the crisis management system at the national level (organizations, leadership and training, legal provisions). Issues requiring urgent attention from the prime minister's office include (1) centralizing information from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, the Ministry of Defense, the Self-Defense Force (SDF), the National Police Agency, etc., and establishing a rapid deployment team, (2) creating a Japanese version of the National Security Council that enables the national government to reach decisions in a shorter time frame, (3) preparing risk-specific response manuals, (4) conducting crisis management simulations/training at the prime minister's office in accordance with these manuals, (5) increasing and relocating military attachés, and (6) ultimately passing partial revisions to the SDF Act to permit the SDF to guard Japanese nationals traveling overland. The next crisis will not wait on us to be ready. 

Toshiyuki Shikata is a Professor at Teikyo University. He retired as Lt. General of the Ground Self-Defense Force (GSDF) in 1992 with his last post being the Commanding Officer of the Northern Army of GSDF. He has been a crisis management advisor for Tokyo Metropolitan Governor, Shitaro Ishihara since 1999 to March 2013.