

Fate of ISIS's Japanese and Jordanian captives uncertain

By Ben McGrath
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As of today, there was still no word about the fate of a Japanese journalist and Jordanian pilot being held captive by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). The group has threatened to kill both men unless its demands were met. Neither Tokyo nor Amman has reported any new developments since the latest deadline for a prisoner exchange expired Thursday sundown in Syria.

Kenji Goto, the 47-year-old Japanese reporter being held by ISIS, appeared in a video on Tuesday holding a photo of a man believed to be Jordanian pilot Lieutenant Moaz al-Kasasbeh. The pilot was conducting a bombing run on ISIS targets in northeastern Syria last month, as part of Jordan's involvement in the renewed US-led renewed war of aggression in the Middle East, when his plane crashed and he was taken prisoner.

In the video—a still picture with audio—Goto relays an ISIS demand that the Jordanian government free Sajida al-Rishawi, an Iraqi woman currently jailed in Jordan, in exchange for his own release. Rishawi was sentenced to death for her role in a 2005 suicide bombing of an Amman hotel that resulted in the deaths of 57 people. While her husband and two others carried out the attack, Rishawi's bomb failed to detonate and she was later arrested.

Goto states in the video: “Any more delays by the Jordanian government will mean they are responsible for the death of their pilot, which will then be followed by mine. I only have 24 hours left to live and the pilot has even less.”

The 24-hour deadline passed and while it was extended another day, there has been no progress on securing the hostages' release, raising concerns that they may have already been executed.

ISIS had stated that Kasasbeh would be killed on

Thursday unless Rishawi was presented at the Turkish-Syrian border. Jordan appeared willing to make the exchange on condition that it received confirmation its pilot was still alive.

It is not clear whether one or both hostages would be exchanged for Rishawi, but Jordan has made no moves to prepare her for an exchange. According to news reports, she has not left the country.

“At this point we want to emphasize that we have asked for proof of life from Daesh (ISIS) and we have not received anything yet,” Jordanian government spokesman Mohammad al-Momani said on Thursday.

The Japanese government said it was working closely with Jordan. Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga stated: “As the situation is developing, I shouldn't comment on details. But, Japan and Jordan are dealing with the matter based on an extremely trusting relationship.”

Goto first appeared in an ISIS video on January 20, alongside a second Japanese man, Haruna Yukawa. Japan was given 72 hours to pay a \$200 million ransom, the same amount that Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has pledged to countries fighting ISIS.

A second video featuring Goto was released last Saturday, with the reporter holding a photo of a decapitated Yukawa, although the latter's death has not been confirmed.

While the Japanese government claimed that it was pursuing every avenue to secure the release of its citizens, it ignored offers of help last week from Ko Nakata, a Muslim scholar, and Kousuke Tsuneoka, a freelance reporter.

Tsuneoka, who was released after being held hostage in Afghanistan in 2010, visited Syria in September in an unsuccessful attempt to gain Yukawa's release. Tsuneoka and Nakata were prevented from leaving

Japan in October after the police seized their passports.

Neither government is genuinely concerned about the fate of their citizens.

Despite widespread domestic opposition to its participation in the latest US-led military aggression in Iraq and Syria, the Jordanian government remains a loyal Washington ally. Jordan has been used by the US military as a training ground for Islamist militants sent to fight Syrian President Bashar al-Assad regime. Many of these so-called rebels have gone on to join the ranks of ISIS.

Yesterday, according to one press report, Jordan has threatened to fast-track the execution of Sajida al-Rishawi and other ISIS prisoners in Jordan if the terrorist group killed Moaz al-Kasasbeh. In other words, Amman will match ISIS savagery with its own barbaric response.

The Japanese government has seized on the hostage crisis to push forward with its plans for remilitarization. Abe's government is preparing to submit 10 bills to the Diet, Japan's parliament, in order to codify in law the government's reinterpretation of the constitution ease restrictions on the Japanese military.

The new laws would allow the Japanese military to be sent overseas to support US-led military interventions without the approval of the parliament. Another law would make it easier for the government to suspend basic democratic rights during any emergency situation, an indication of the sort of repressive measures that will be imposed against anti-war protesters or others opposing Tokyo's military policies.

The Obama administration has made clear that it opposes any negotiations with ISIS. On Sunday, White House Chief of Staff Denis McDonough stated: "The policies are well set: the US doesn't pay ransoms and will not do prisoner swaps."

The US government is intent on exploiting this hostage crisis, as it did the ISIS executions of American journalists James Foley and Steven Sotloff last year, to justify expanding its new war in the Middle East and operations targeting the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.