



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE

DIPLOMACY IN ACTION

Press Availability on International Parental Child Abduction

Remarks

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ASSISTANT SECRETARY CAMPBELL: First of all, let me apologize for keeping you waiting today. We've gotten behind schedule, and I'm just very grateful for you taking the time out of busy schedules. Before we get started, I want to thank all of you for coming and being here and demonstrating your interest in the important issue of child abduction and parents left behind. Our children are our most important and cherished resource. The U.S. Government places the highest possible priority on the welfare of children who have been the victims of international parental child abduction, and strongly believes that children should grow up with access to both parents.

Japan, as you know, is an important partner and friend to the United States. However, on the issue of International Parental Child Abduction, our points of view differ quite dramatically. Culturally, I understand our two nations' approaches to divorce and child custody are very different, but, as a result, American left behind parents have little or no access to their children once abducted to Japan, even though the children are American citizens as well as Japanese.

Dual national U.S.-Japan children were born into two cultures. The United States Government strongly believes that these children have a right to enjoy the love of both parents and the benefits of both cultures. With over 100 children affected by this situation, it is imperative that we look for ways to resolve existing cases, to work together, and to take steps to ensure mechanisms, such as the Hague Convention, are in place to prevent future abduction cases.

Today, I have just come from a meeting with American parents residing in Japan who have little or no access to their children. The children of some of these parents were abducted by Japanese spouses in Japan, while others have been refused access to their children, often in defiance of Japanese court decisions.

On Friday last week, I met in Washington with 21 parents and family members whose children were abducted to Japan, often against legal rulings in the United States. They were all very well versed on the cultural and legal impediments that have prevented them from gaining access to their children after they were abducted by their Japanese parent. I expressed hope that because Japan's new leadership is willing to look at these things in a new light, the possibility exists for their cases to be resolved. I will continue to raise this issue in my meetings with Japanese counterparts, as I have today.

Let me just say that we have begun a process of bilateral meetings on these important issues between the United States and Japan and the Japanese Foreign Ministry has established a part of the Ministry to deal with abductee issues for children. The case, the situation, however, is that we need to see progress on these issues.

This matter has raised very real concern among senior and prominent Americans in Congress, on Capitol Hill, and elsewhere, and I believe that it is time for our two governments to create the best possible situation for these tragic cases to be resolved. I've been meeting with these families now for months. Many of their situations are tragic. And the situation has to be resolved in order to ensure that U.S.-Japan relations continue on such a positive course. This issue left unresolved has the potential to raise very real concerns, something that all of us seek to avoid.

With that, I'd be happy to take questions or comments. I think that this is an issue that requires greater understanding in Japan and greater support from the Japanese government in order to resolve. Thank you. Please identify yourself if you would as we go forward.

MODERATOR: And also, please limit your questions to the topic.

ASSISTANT SECRETARY CAMPBELL: There will be other opportunities to talk about Futenma and other matters of mutual concern.

QUESTION: Charlie Reed, Stars & Stripes. Is the U.S. prepared to take any action to ensure that this issue is resolved, and is extradition possible?



ASSISTANT SECRETARY CAMPBELL: We have had discussions. I think our preference, obviously, given the fact that the United States and Japan are such close allies is to avoid such a situation, but we will look at all options going forward.

QUESTION: Can you expand on that?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY CAMPBELL: I think I'll just let that stand where it is. Anything else?

QUESTION: Yuko Hayashi, from the Wall Street Journal. You mentioned that there are over 100 children that are affected. Could you tell us exactly how many cases that are pending right now?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY CAMPBELL: I believe that the number of cases are somewhere in the range of about 70 that are active now. But we don't have a full knowledge of the number over the last 20 years or so. Some cases are inactive or have not been followed up. But it is a very substantial number. And many of these families and parents have been working, some for decades, to try to gain access to their children. I met with one parent who last saw his child when she was three years old, and she just turned 18. So this is a serious matter, and it's one that has been ongoing for a long time, and we think that given the changes in Japan, that we see a very real opportunity for progress.

I also must say that meeting with these families and these spouses is heartbreaking. Clearly, there needs to be a change in how these issues are dealt with going forward, and also the existing cases. Ambassador Roos here has been a leader on this issue in his short time in Japan. He convened a meeting of eight nations who are also suffering from some of the same issues, and he has had extensive interactions with Foreign Minister Okada, who has, I think, gained a greater understanding of the magnitude of these problems and has promised to lend his support going forward. Any others? Please go ahead.

QUESTION: Malcolm Foster of the AP. You said at the very end there, if I'm not mistaken, that this issue, left unresolved, could raise serious concerns and affect the U.S.-Japan relationship. I wonder if you could elaborate on that?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY CAMPBELL: I think I'll just leave it at that. I mean, this is a very -- it's been striking to me how rapidly this issue has gained support in Congress, and how much concern it's raised. And so I would just say that I'm a person who believes deeply and profoundly in the U.S.-Japan relationship. I don't think the United States can do anything effectively in Asia without a strong partnership. But at the same time, like in all complex, important relationships, there are issues that pose challenges to the health and well-being. And this is an issue that has been left unaddressed for a long period of time and is gaining momentum in the United States in terms of its overall focus. And that is why we're trying to raise publicity on it, trying to underscore the importance of taking steps to help resolve the cases, so that we can avoid a situation where this in any way complicates the smooth running and important nature of our overall strategic relationship.

QUESTION: And how receptive has Foreign Minister Okada been?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY CAMPBELL: I think that there has been the beginning of a recognition now at the highest levels of the Japanese government that something must be done to take immediate steps. Yes, I believe that is the case. And I have confidence in Japanese partners to do the right thing on this as well.

QUESTION: Thank you for taking my question. I'm Maegawa from Asahi Shimbun, a national newspaper in Japan. I have a question on the Hague -- this issue -- because some Japanese citizens are very concerned because this issue includes some of the domestic violence cases where some spouses or ex-spouses have actually fled from the spouses and had no choice but to take the children with them. How do you answer that question?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY CAMPBELL: I have to say, I've heard this on a number of occasions from Japanese friends, and I think that there is the view that this is a very widespread phenomenon. These allegations caused extraordinary unhappiness among this community, most of whom in the United States already had legal custody, sometimes had gone through divorce or were separated. We can find almost no cases of alleged or actual substantiated claims of violence and where those apply, we of course, understand and support that. But because of the legal situation in Japan, I think that this allegation is used very loosely and oftentimes inappropriately without any supporting criteria whatsoever, and our particular issue is with a situation in which once there has been a separation or a divorce in the United States and when a parent is given dual custody -- parents are given dual custody -- and one of the parents takes the children to Japan outside of a legal framework that's been established. That's kidnapping, and that's a very grave and worrisome problem that needs to be dealt with. I would say that there is a substantial misconception on this issue in Japan that the cases that we are dealing with are primarily those of domestic abuse. Our judgment would be that that is not the case. Okay, last question.

QUESTION: My name is Masami Ito from the Japan Times. I'm just curious, so you've been discussing this with Japanese Foreign Ministry officials, and what kind of reasons have they given you that Japan is reluctant to ratify the Hague Convention?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY CAMPBELL: Generally, they are explanations that Japanese culture is different and that in many situations in Japan that this problem exists not just between Japanese nationals and foreigners, but within Japan itself. And that children often stay with the mother in Japan, and that there is a cultural dynamic here that comes to play. I listen, I understand those issues, but these are children that are born into two cultures, and we think steps need to be taken to help facilitate dialogue, visitation, greater access for parents with their children. And if I could say, I think this is the humane way to proceed, and it is -- it meets -- the very highest standards that Japan sets for itself in so many ways. And I also believe that some very basic steps can improve this situation quite substantially. Thank you all very much. I appreciate you taking the time today.