

Campaigners fight to clear "Tokyo Two" in Whaling Case. Treatment of Greenpeace activists creates worldwide protests

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Extraordinary treatment of two Greenpeace activists creates worldwide protests

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Six months ago Sato Junichi and Suzuki Toru were ordinary men looking after young families. But in June they were arrested by a group of uniformed police, taken to a detention center in Aomori, northern Japan and held for 26 days.

They were granted bail after paying 4,000,000 yen each, but their release is highly conditional. Neither is allowed to freely meet or talk, leave home for extended periods or travel abroad. Both are watched by detectives and followed. They can only talk to journalists, separately, in their lawyer's office. Any violation of these conditions will land them back in jail.

Their crime? -- Taking a 23-kg box of whale meat from a delivery company warehouse. If, as looks very likely, they are found guilty of trespassing and theft, they face a maximum of ten years in prison.



Sato Junichi presents whale meat to journalists in Tokyo on May 15 that Greenpeace claims it intercepted to prove large-scale fraud by whalers. AP photo

"Sometimes there are three policemen watching my house," says Sato (32), who was interrogated relentlessly and admits the ordeal has been hard on his family. "They're quite conservative and of course they're very worried." Suzuki (41) shunned visits from his

wife because he didn't want his two-year-old child to see him in a police cell.



Sato and fellow Greenpeace activist Suzuki Toru were arrested on trespassing and theft charges in June and were bailed the following month. Jeremy Sutton-Hibbert for Greenpeace Japan

The arrest of Greenpeace activists Sato and Suzuki is the last salvo in the bitter war between anti-whaling campaigners and Japan's authorities. Tensions between the two sides have ratcheted up since Japan announced last year that its fleet would add 50 humpback whales to its disputed annual cull in the Southern Oceans.

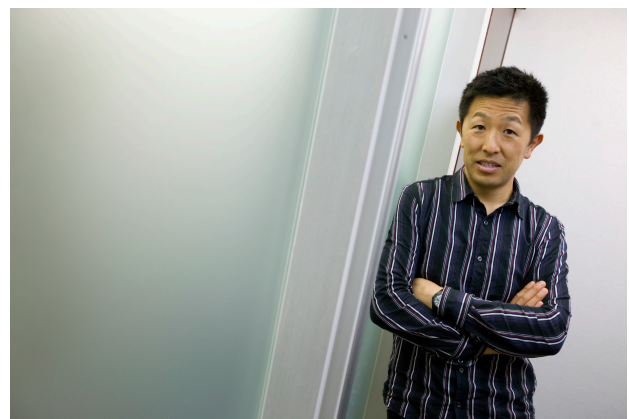
International protests forced the cancellation of the humpback kill but no let up in the stinging rhetoric of Japan's Fisheries Agency, who denounced Greenpeace as environmental

"terrorists."

For its part, Greenpeace upped the ante in the campaign this year with an investigation into what they said was large-scale fraud aboard Japan's main whaling ship, the Nisshin Maru. The investigation culminated in the decision to intercept the box of whale meat from a warehouse in mid-April, one of 47 parcels allegedly sent by Nisshin Maru crew members to addresses across Japan.

According to Greenpeace, whalers aboard the ship have long had the right to choose cuts from the government-subsidized whaling catch, which they sell on the black market. "This was happening systematically for years," says the group's Irish spokesman Dave Walsh, who claims the whalers earn thousands of dollars a season for something that is already tax-funded.

Sato and Suzuki aired these allegations at a press conference that won worldwide attention, before handing the meat over to the police in May. The authorities responded by ignoring the claims and launching a ferocious campaign against Greenpeace.



Suzuki Toru. Jeremy Sutton-Hibbert for Greenpeace Japan

A total of 38 policemen were reportedly assigned from Aomori to investigate the "theft" case, plus a large squad of special detectives

from Tokyo, who rejected Sato and Suzuki's argument that the meat was borrowed to prove a point, not stolen.

Greenpeace phone records were intercepted, its Tokyo office was raided and the homes of several members were searched. TV crews tipped off and waiting outside the office to record the search later filed reports claiming that Greenpeace members were being detained under "anti-terrorist laws."

Would a relatively small incident of property theft worth perhaps \$3000 normally warrant such an expensive and carefully calibrated investigation? Neither the Aomori Prosecutors Office nor the Aomori police responded to questions from the Irish Times about the case, or what might have provoked it. Japan's Fisheries Agency also declined to go on the record, though an agency official, speaking anonymously, rejected claims that the arrest of the two was politically motivated.

"Western-style demonstrations (are not) accepted by many Japanese," he said. "The attitude (of Greenpeace) is considered very irresponsible and arrogant by many." The official branded the two men "criminals" who had forced the authorities to take action.

"Note that what they have done are not simple crimes but...challenges not only to the police and to the government, but also the public." Given the level of general anger against what the two did, says the official, "I believe, the police have decided to treat this issue seriously."

But Kaido Yuichi, a lawyer for the two men,

calls the charges against two men overblown. "They didn't eat or sell the meat; they were trying to expose embezzlement and misuse of tax money. What they did might merit say a fine or a warning, not arresting and imprisoning them." He says the Japanese media has, in effect, already convicted the men.

The arrest of the so-called Tokyo Two has sparked a global campaign to clear their names and expose what activists call a witch-hunt.

Greenpeace supporters have bombarded the Aomori prosecutors with over quarter of a million-mails demanding that charges against the two be dropped, and a delegation handed a letter of protest into the office of Prime Minister Taro Aso yesterday. Demonstrations are planned this week outside Japanese embassies around the world.

The protests come as Japan's whaling fleet again heads for the Southern Ocean in search of 935 minke and 50 fin whales, part of its annual "scientific whaling" expedition. The fleet's November departure was shrouded in secrecy to avoid protests.

Sato and Suzuki face a series of pre-trial sessions before the public trial begins, probably sometime next march. In the meantime, they are planning their defense. Although few believe the court will impose the maximum sentence, they say they are taking nothing for granted. "We can't underestimate what might happen because the case has become so political," points out Suzuki.

He remains upbeat, but Sato, the more experienced activist, has lost weight and looks tired from the pressure of the looming trial. Still, he calls his arrest "positive" because it has allowed people to see what he calls the problems in Japanese society. "There is a lack of democracy and a lot of pressure on citizen activism. This is clearly an overreaction by the authorities."

As evidence, he says when the police raided his home, they seemed delighted to find the T-shirt he wore to the April press conference where they made the embezzlement claims, "proving" that he was there. "I wasn't denying I was there. But they needed something to show the media waiting in front of my house."

David McNeill writes for The Irish Times and other newspapers, including The Chronicle of Higher Education and The Independent. He is a Japan Focus coordinator.

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