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BRIEFING: Naval role for Afghanistan a tough sell

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By Takehiko Kambayashi - TOKYO -- Japanese Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda faces an uphill battle in his bid to resume naval operations to support the U.S.-led war on terror in Afghanistan.

Mr. Fukuda repeated his pledge to resume naval operations during his New Year's message Tuesday.

"At this very moment in the Indian Ocean, a number of countries are cooperating carrying on their fight against terrorism," Mr. Fukuda said. "I would like to show Japan's attitude of working hard with them for the world as soon as possible."

Japan's naval mission in the Indian Ocean provided logistical support to coalition forces in Afghanistan, beginning in November 2001.

During the next six years, its ships provided 132 million gallons of fuel — free of charge — to coalition warships from the U.S., Britain and Pakistan, the Defense Ministry said.

Japan, however, had to recall the mission on Nov. 1 when parliament refused to extend the six-year mission.

During a White House meeting with President Bush two weeks later, his first as prime minister, Mr. Fukuda vowed to do his "level best to achieve an early passage of a bill for the early resumption" of the refueling mission near Afghanistan.

In an attempt to bolster support, his Cabinet submitted legislation that would return Japanese ships to the Indian Ocean with a more defined mandate.

Operations would be limited to refueling and providing water to ships that monitor and inspect vessels suspected of links to smuggling or terrorism.

Even if the opposition-controlled upper house of parliament rejects the legislation, Mr. Fukuda retains enough support in the more powerful lower house to override the objections.

Minoru Morita, a Tokyo-based political analyst, said other issues appear more pressing to Japanese voters.

"Many Japanese people are saying politics in this country is stuck in such a small issue. They think there are so many major problems to tackle. They are worried that Japan has yet to overcome deflation and that the gap between rich and poor is widening," said Mr. Morita, who makes more than 300 speeches a year across Japan.

"Many people are disappointed with lack of leadership shown by Mr. Fukuda and Mr. [Ichiro] Ozawa, [the leader of the main opposition party]. They despair of Japan's future," he said.

That could explain declining public support for the mission, with opposition from pacifist supporters of Japan's war-renouncing constitution and hard-liners angered at U.S. concessions to North Korea in nuclear negotiations.

Scandals over the government's mishandling of millions of public-pension records, a bribery case involving a former top Defense Ministry official and a prolonged legal battle over compensating hundreds of Japanese who contracted hepatitis C from tainted blood products also have eroded support for his government.

According to opinion polls by major daily Mainichi Shimbun, 50 percent of those surveyed are opposed to the mission, while 41 percent support its resumption.

Major polls also showed approval ratings for his Cabinet hovering at just over 30 percent.

Toshiyuki Shikata, a law professor at Teikyo University in Tokyo and a retired army general, said it will take time to work around opposition from the upper house, especially with U.S. concessions to North Korea eroding support from lawmakers who normally would support the effort.

"The U.S. has raised distrust among us because they only present lip service when it comes to the [North Korean] abduction issue," said Mr. Shikata. "They should take a resolute stance against North Korea and solve both the issues of abduction and nuclear weapons programs."

North Korea admitted kidnapping at least 13 Japanese to serve as language instructors for its spies.

Moreover, Japan warned the United States that relations will suffer if Washington removes North Korea from a list of terrorist states as part of six-nation talks on the North's nuclear program without first resolving the abduction issue.

Some in the Bush administration advocate such a move, especially at the State Department, which is in charge of negotiations with

North Korea.

For now, however, the nuclear talks have stalled because North Korea missed a year-end deadline to declare all past nuclear activities.

For Japanese, the issue of the abductees is as emotional as the POW/MIA issue that bedeviled U.S. rapprochement with Vietnam for decades.

Last month, Japan's parliament passed a resolution urging Washington not to take North Korea off its list of terrorism-supporting states in exchange for progress in a nuclear-disarmament deal.

U.S. Ambassador J. Thomas Schieffer, addressing reporters recently at his Tokyo residence, said, "It would be a real tragedy if somehow Japan tried to opt out of the war on terror. It's just an issue that requires a unified international community to make any headway against."

About 50,000 American troops are based in Japan under a security treaty.
