

Before Talking about Energy Deal with Russia

By Sasaki Akira

Today I found an "Emergency Appeal" of a group of influential Japanese, comprising 92 professors, journalists, politicians, former diplomats, etc., printed on such national newspapers as Yomiuri, Mainichi, Nikkei and Sankei calling for the rejection of suggestions by Prime Minister Aso Taro and former Administrative Vice-Foreign Minister Yachi Shotaro to the effect that Japan might settle for the partition of the Northern Territories between Japan and Russia. I was deeply impressed and moved by this timely appeal led by Prof. Ito Kenichi, President of the Japan Forum on International Relations, as it was timed to coincide with the day when Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin was slated to arrive in Japan for his talks with Mr. Aso on the energy deal as well as the territorial issues.

However beneficial an energy deal with Russia may be, we should not forget a tragic history in Sakhalin around the end of World War II. Prime Minister Aso recently visited Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk, capital city of Sakhalin, for the first time as a Japanese prime minister after the War, and attended a ceremony together with Russian President Dmitry Medvedev to celebrate the start of the natural gas production by the Sakhalin-2 project off Sakhalin. The project will give Japan, which relies on imports for most of its energy resources, about 7 percent of the nation's total LNG imports. The Sakhalin 2 is partially nationalized by Russia, but remains operated by its original developers, Royal-Dutch Shell, Mitsui and Mitsubishi. The Japanese government has invested 207 billion yen in Sakhalin, including Sakhalin-1 project, another oil and natural gas development project.

Before the end of the war, the southern half of Sakhalin was a Japanese territory called Karafuto and about 450,000 Japanese lived there. On August 9, 1945, the Soviet Union troops crossed the border of the southern Sakhalin and fierce fighting continued until August 23, even after Japan surrendered to the Allied Forces. During the two weeks' battle, more than 2,700 Japanese citizens and soldiers were killed there. The Soviet Union's action in Sakhalin was approved in advance by the United States and Britain at the Yalta conference in February, 1945. This resulted in the violation of the

Japan-Soviet Union Neutrality Pact signed in 1941.

In addition, on August 22, three Japanese return-home ships from the southern Sakhalin, carrying about 5,700 refugees, most of whom were women, children and elderly, were torpedoed by submarines of unidentified nationality off Rumoi, west coast of Hokkaido. Two of the ships were sunk, and the other one was seriously damaged, having a huge hole as large as 5m. high by 10m. wide in the starboard hull. Despite her serious damage, the ship counterattacked the submarines with her guns and sank at least one of them. Luckily, she could narrowly make it to Rumoi port. And I was a lucky boy to be among those who survived. But more than 1,700 refugees aboard the three ships were killed and lost in a day. It is well known that Stalin wanted to occupy the northern half of Hokkaido, setting a border between Rumoi in the west and Kushiro in the east coast of Hokkaido. Recently, Russia admitted the sunken submarine had belonged to the Soviet Union and been engaged in the operation off Rumoi. But it still refuses to admit to have attacked the three Japanese ships.

Six years later, in 1951, the Japanese government abandoned various territorial claims, including the southern Sakhalin, at the San Francisco peace conference. But there was no description on sovereignty over the southern Sakhalin. That was why the Soviet Union did not sign the treaty. De facto domination of the island by Russia is maintained even though its occupation of the southern Sakhalin is not authorized by international law. In 2001, however, Japan established a consulate general at Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk, which was said to be tantamount to admitting Russian sovereignty over the southern Sakhalin.

There are many things to be done before talking about energy deal with Russia. Among them, I would like to raise three issues to which I hope our government will pay more attention to. First, to make a genuine diplomatic effort to clarify the nationality of the submarines that attacked the three Japanese ships off the coast of Rumoi. Second, to give a clearer explanation on its ambiguous attitude toward sovereignty over the southern Sakhalin. And finally, to establish a memorial for the war dead in the southern Sakhalin and off Rumoi.

(This is the original text of an article written by Mr. Sasaki Akira for the "JFIR Commentary.")