

ARCHIVE

North Korean Ferry Makes First Port Visit of the Year to Japan

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A North Korean cargo and passenger ferry, a major economic link for the cash-strapped communist state, has arrived at a northern Japanese port for a 24-hour visit - its first journey to Japan this year. The vessel was greeted by demonstrators and some 500 police officers.

About 100 Japanese protesters waved their fists in the air and shouted "go back home," as the Mangyongbong arrived at the port of Niigata Wednesday morning.

Many of the demonstrators were family members of those abducted by North Korean agents in Japan during the 1970's and 1980's.

The head of the association of family members, Teruaki Masumoto, shouts at the North Korean crew aboard the ship to bring back from North Korea the Japanese who were abducted. North Korea has acknowledged abducting Mr. Masumoto's sister, Rumiko, in 1978 but says she later died of a heart attack and her remains were washed away when a cemetery was flooded.

Japan disputes North Korea's accounts of a number of the reported deaths of those abducted. Family members say they believe many are still alive. Japanese officials say more than 100 people might have been abducted or were lured to North Korea and then held against their will.

Shortly after the 9,600 ton North Korean vessel docked on Wednesday, it was boarded by Coast Guard and customs inspectors who said they found no violations. Japan has made it more difficult for North Korean ships to enter the country by enacting tougher insurance requirements to protect against future oil spills and other accidents involving North Korea's rusting cargo fleet.

Japan and North Korea have no diplomatic relations. The Mangyongbong, the only direct ferry service between the two countries, canceled a planned voyage to Niigata in January due to a problem in obtaining the insurance required under the new regulations.

The Mangyongbong has been suspected of transporting parts for North Korea's missile program, smuggling drugs and other contraband and serving as a communications conduit for Pyongyang's intelligence agents in Japan.

Local government officials in Niigata say the ship is expected to depart Thursday with 80 tons of cargo and 200 passengers, mainly students at Korean schools in Japan and other ethnic Koreans traveling to visit relatives in the reclusive state.
