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**Parents march in Tokyo to urge Biden to address child custody issue**

TOKYO (Kyodo) -- Around 20 Japanese and Japan-based foreign parents who are facing difficulties in gaining access to their children following failed international marriages marched in Tokyo on Tuesday in seeking help from visiting U.S. Vice President Joe Biden to push the Japanese government to address the issue of child custody.

Holding banners reading "Stop child abduction" and "Why don't we have rights to see our children in Japan?" the parents embarked on a march after holding a rally in a park in Tokyo's Roppongi district.

At issue is child alienation and abduction by Japanese parents, as courts in Japan tend to award mothers sole custody after divorce and it is not unusual for children to stop seeing their fathers after their parents break up.

Japan recently launched preparations for joining the 1980 Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction, which sets procedures for settling cross-border child custody disputes.

Akihisa Hirata, co-organizer of a group called Left Behind Parents Japan, said in his message to Biden, "Please urge the Japanese government to address child abduction and also establish joint parenting and joint custody."

A male participant at the rally said, "Japanese people cannot change their behavior without a strong foreign pressure. We call for changes in the laws to realize joint custody and joint parenting, which is widely adopted in other parts of the world."

Anthony del Vecchio, a U.S. citizen who has not seen his daughter for seven years after divorcing his Japanese wife, said before the start of the protest march, "With respect to the protection of human rights in general and children's rights in particular, Japan lags far behind the rest of the developed world."

"Its system of sole custody upon divorce runs contrary to common sense, sound psychological research and international norms," he said.

The U.S. State Department lists 123 active cases involving 173 children who have been abducted from the United States to Japan, but it is "not aware of a single case in which a child abducted to Japan has ever been returned to America," he said.

Biden is on a three-day visit to Japan through Wednesday. The issue of child custody was not apparently discussed in his meeting with Japanese Prime Minister Naoto Kan earlier in the day.

(Mainichi Japan) August 24, 2011

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