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## **IRAQ; Japan urged to consult Asian nations on hostages**

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Japan should consult other Asian countries on how to deal with the hostage issue in Iraq, a Japanese international relations professor said.

Hiroataka Watanabe, of the Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, put the accent on Asian countries that have sent troops to Iraq. These include Thailand, the Philippines and South Korea.

Mr Watanabe was commenting on the capture of three Japanese civilians on Thursday, two volunteers and a journalist.

He also urged Japan to call for a special session of the United Nations to discuss the hostage issue, and talk to the United States. But he stressed that talks with other Asian countries was the top priority.

Mr Watanabe was speaking on the sidelines of a conference of Asian and European journalists hosted by the European Commission in Tokyo and the **Asia Europe Foundation** based in Singapore.

Japan sent about 600 troops of the Self-Defence Force to Iraq in January under its commitment to the security alliance with the US.

"Japan should be more independent," Mr Watanabe said. "Our diplomatic mind is focused on the relationship with the US." Mr Watanabe said Japan should have held consultations with other East Asian countries before sending troops to Iraq. It would have made the stance of these countries, some of which were staunchly opposed to the US-led war, more important to the rest of the world.