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Russian Man Swims to Japan to Apply for Asylum – Reports

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Japan's chief cabinet secretary Katsunobu Katō said Monday that the government will "take appropriate measures" after confirming the details of the Russian national's arrival. **Ryo FUKAsawa / flickr (CC BY 2.0)**

A Russian man swam 20 kilometers from the disputed Kuril Islands to Japan to ask for political asylum, state media reported Sunday following Japanese media reports that the man had been detained in Hokkaido.

Authorities in the Yuzhno-Kurilsk municipal administration said the refugee was an Urals native who had received free land on the Kuril island of Kunashir as part of Russia's program to rejuvenate its Far East regions.

Citing an unnamed source familiar with the situation, the state-run RIA Novosti news agency identified the swimmer as 38-year-old Vaas Feniks Nokard.

"It looks like he got there in a wetsuit. He just crossed the 24-kilometer strait by swimming," the source was quoted as saying.

“He lived in the Kuril Islands for three years, didn’t work anywhere, lived in Golovino [village], slept in a tent or settled with whomever he met,” they added.

Nokard reportedly asked a friend to sell the motorcycle that he left on the shore and transfer him the money.

The report noted that Nokard was allegedly deported from Japan in 2011 for violating visa rules, as well as from Thailand and Bali for forging documents.

Russian media in 2019 profiled Nokard as a native of Izhevsk, a city in the republic of Udmurtia 1,000 kilometers east of Moscow, who moved to the Kurils after receiving free land as part of Russia’s “Far Eastern Hectare” program.

A report by the independent Novaya Gazeta newspaper that year describes Nokard as having a fondness for Japanese culture and having attended Japanese language classes in Far East Russia. The newspaper also reported that he was deported from Japan in 2011 for overstaying his visa.

There has not been official confirmation or denial of the Russian asylum seeker’s identity and Russia’s consulate in Sapporo accused Japanese authorities of failing to disclose any information about him.

The consulate appeared to dispute the RIA Novosti source’s claim about the man swimming to Japan in a wetsuit, saying that he had arrived in Hokkaido on a rubber boat.

Japan’s chief cabinet secretary Katsunobu Katō said Monday that the government will “take appropriate measures” after confirming the details of the Russian national’s arrival, according to RIA Novosti.

Russia has controlled the Kurils since Soviet troops seized the island chain in the last days of World War II, deploying military bases and missile systems in the decades since. The territorial dispute has kept Russia and Japan from signing a formal peace treaty to mark the war's end.

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