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**HEADLINE:** Thousands protest in Japan against Iraq war

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**BODY:**

Several thousand people staged rallies across Japan Saturday, kicking off a worldwide demonstration against war in Iraq.

Protests were being held from the nation's northernmost prefecture of Hokkaido to the southernmost Okinawa, ranging from study group meetings to concerts.

In the capital a massive rally began with a concert in a park close to the Kasumigaseki government ministry district. Participants are to march through Ginza, Tokyo's glitziest shopping street, later in the day.

"Some 2,000 people have already gathered in the park," an organiser said. "We hope the number of demonstrators will increase further when we begin to march."

One American man, participating in the rally, carried a banner, which read: "Today, I am ashamed to be a US citizen." Another demonstrator carried a banner: "**No war** for oil!"

Similar rallies were held in more than 10 Japanese cities, organisers said.

"I hope that President (George W.) Bush, who is acting like a cowboy, will recognize that an era of western films was over," said Tomoharu Yamauchi, 45, a coffee shop owner.

"We have to stop (the United States) from killing people. Victims are always the weak," Yamauchi said."

World Peace Now, organising the rally, has urged Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi to give up a plan to join a US military campaign against Iraq.

"The Koizumi administration wants to cooperate within the attacking alliance of UK and US and to expand their military engagement in the region by dispatching the number of Self Defense Forces abroad including Afghanistan and Iraq," World Peace Now said in its website.

"It is clearly in contradiction with Article 9 of the Constitution," which bars the use of force in settling disputes, the anti-war group said.

News reports said Japan was considering a new law to help provide logistic support to a US-led attack against Iraq, similar to legislation that allowed Tokyo to give assistance during the war in Afghanistan.

The planned march was timed to coincide with mass demonstrations opposing any war in Iraq in Washington, other American cities and at least 18 countries including Argentina,

Britain, Egypt, Mexico and Spain.

In the United States, organisers said hundreds of thousands of activists would descend on Washington and other cities this weekend.

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Iraq-Japan-protest

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