

# Japan's World War II "Comfort Women". Denial of Prime Minister Abe Shinzo

"If we don't face our past, we're bound to repeat the same mistakes." Japanese wartime medical orderly reports on army's role in maintaining "comfort women" system

By David McNeill Global Research, October 22, 2014 The Asia-Pacific Journal, Vol. 12, Issue 42, No. 1 Region: <u>Asia</u> Theme: <u>Crimes against Humanity</u>, <u>History</u>, <u>Law and Justice</u>, <u>Women's Rights</u>

This article contains David McNeill's introduction followed by Matsumoto Masayoshi's testimony (Japanese and English transcript and video of testimony), translation by Miguel Quintana

For years, Abe Shinzo, Japan's prime minister, has been playing with diplomatic fire over a sordid episode of wartime history that has been at the center of a storm of controversy involving Japan, China, Korea and other outposts of Japan's empire: the herding of thousands of women across Asia into Japanese military brothels. His decision this year to order an investigation into a landmark government apology to the so-called "comfort women" might have helped end the controversy. Instead, it has further ignited it, which may indeed have been Abe's intention – he has campaigned for nearly two decades to undermine the apology.

The 1993 Kono statement, compiled in consultation with South Korea by Japan's then chief cabinet secretary Kono Yohei, acknowledged the army's role in forcing the women into sexual slavery. Nationalists, championed by the Yomiuri, Japan's most popular newspaper, deny coercion and insist the women voluntarily provided "comfort" to frontline troops. They have repeatedly demanded the withdrawal of the so-called Kono statement, with potentially explosive diplomatic consequences.

In June, a government panel set up by Abe said the facts used to draft the statement were accurate and there are no plans to change it. But the panel's report also revealed that the statement was the product of months of secret negotiations with South Korean diplomats. The diplomatic record reveals intense discussion on the level of "coerciveness" used to recruit the women, with Japan implying that some may have gone to brothels voluntarily. Predictably, perhaps, revisionists say that proves the statement was a political fudge, not an admission of official responsibility.

The campaign to rewrite the Kono statement has been given an added push by the decision of the Asahi newspaper in August to retract a series of articles it carried on the comfort women. The articles, written in the 1980s and '90s, some of which used a now discredited witness called Yoshida Seiji, were not true, said the newspaper. The editors had been "unable to see through" Yoshida's "fraudulent testimony" they admitted ruefully. The humbling of Japan's liberal flagship has triggered a tsunami of abuse. The *Yomiuri* said the *Asahi's* coverage had helped fuel anti-Japan sentiment in South Korea, and became a basis of "misperception of Japan" throughout the world. Abe told the *Sankei* newspaper, which has led a two-decade campaign against the Kono Statement that "many people had suffered" because of the Asahi's reporting. Emboldened, ultra-nationalists have threatened to firebomb universities that employ ex-Asahi journalists.

A boycott campaign, led by the Sankei, has taken a toll. Asahi's circulation is down by 770,000 since November 2013. A national "anti-Asahi Shimbun" committee, led by lawmaker Nakayama Nariaki, is seeking to press the advantage. Its inaugural conference in

Tokyo this month (Oct. 25<sup>th</sup>) will discuss plans to widen the boycott and haul Asahi editors and journalists before the Diet. The committee's ultimate aim is clear: pressure the government to rewrite the Kono statement and in the words of cabinet minister Inada Tomomi, "restore Japan's honor."

Neonationalists such as Inada have ignored a string of well-documented reports making it clear that the Asahi's coverage of Yoshida had relatively little impact on the surge of interest in the comfort women issue in Japan and internationally, and in no way detracts from the extensive documentation of military and government involvement in the comfort women system. Many of those involved in the 2007 US House of Representatives Comfort Women resolution 121, for instance, including Dennis Halpin, a former senior Asia policy staffer, said in September that: "There was ample documentary and testimonial evidence from across the Indo-Pacific region to support the fact that Imperial Japan organized and managed a system of sexual slavery for its military..." The Yoshida memoir and Asahi's reporting of it were "not factors" in drafting the resolution, they added.

Nevertheless, several members of Abe's cabinet are gearing up for a demand that the

statement be withdrawn next year, the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of World War II – and the

50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the normalization of relations with South Korea, an action, if successful, that is certain to poison Japan's relations with South Korea, China and other Asian countries.

Abe, as a parliamentarian, long supported nationalist think tanks that reject Japan's "apology diplomacy" for its wartime misdeeds. During his first term as prime minister in 2007, he got himself into hot water by saying there was "no proof" the comfort women were coerced by the military. But in March, 2014 he bowed to pressure by pledging not to revise the Kono statement.

Ironically, the statement was intended to end the controversy and reset the diplomatic compass. Instead, the dispute has festered and spread to the US, where a string of memorials to the comfort women, erected by Korean communities, has triggered Japanese diplomatic protests.

One way out of the impasse might be to shift the probe to the perpetrators. Matsumoto Masayoshi, a former medical orderly with the Japanese army, has spoken out this year about what he saw. Matsumoto, 92, says Korean women were used like public toilets, with soldiers lining up to rape them. He has offered to tell what happened to anyone who will listen. It might come as no surprise to learn that nobody from Abe's government has bothered to turn up and hear his story.

# Matsumoto full video: Japanese testimony with English translation by Miguel Quintana

#### 

Our battalion had approximately one thousand men.

We took about 5 or 6 "comfort women" with us.

I was a corpsman... do you understand that word?

I had to help the army doctor to do tests for venereal disease on comfort women.

#### 00:37 \_\_\_\_\_\_

I learned the testing methods, how to handle the equipment and all that.

00:45 \_\_\_\_\_\_

Obviously we didn't have microscopes, so we did simple visual checks.

00:49

There's this instrument you put in the vagina.

It pops open like this and allows you to see inside.

01:07

We just visually checked if the inside didn't look funny.

#### 01:15

There's a place called Yu County .in (Shanxi) China. It was a large city surrounded by ramparts. That's where our battalion had its headquarters.

Apart from that, companies one and two were stationed further away, but there weren't any comfort women there. You could only find them at battalion headquarters.

#### 01:37

Attached to the headquarters were one company and the command section. That was about 300 soldiers.

01:47

The rest of the battalion was spread over towns and villages 20 to 30 kilometers further away. They – how can I put it – ruled over that entire area.

#### 

The men in the company attached to the battalion HQ may have been able to visit the brothels from time to time, but they were primarily meant for the officers and the NCOs.

#### 02:15

These [women] had definitely not arrived there of their own will. Nobody would be willing to travel to such a remote area.

#### 

The money was handled by Japanese civilians employed by the military, who took care of the women.

#### 

The reason why the comfort women system was set up is that our soldiers were having sex with the Chinese. Diseases started spreading and that would have made the army completely useless.

#### 02:57

# 

This situation was unacceptable, and that's why they created the comfort women system and had those women accompany us.

#### 03:05

When we raided a village, there happened to be some villagers left behind. Normally during a raid all the villagers would flee.

#### 03:14

03:14 Among them were seven or eight women.

#### 03:21

The soldiers grabbed them and took them away to the barracks. Knowing that they would be killed if they resisted, these women came along without resisting.

#### 03:34

The women were made to live inside the barracks, and whenever the soldiers felt like it they would visit them to have sex.

#### 

So my job as a corpsman was to monitor these people for venereal diseases.

The infirmary had a pile of condoms. I distributed them to the soldiers and urged them to be careful. That was my job as a corpsman

04:11

The women understood that they would be killed if they resisted, so they were docile. They didn't say anything; they just did as they were told.

After about one week, our commander said "that's enough, let them go." And he released those women, telling them to go home.

# 04:39 \_\_\_\_\_\_

But in exchange, he asked the head of the village to give us other women.

And so two women came to us. I think these two were actually professionals.

# 05:00

And again, I was in charge of checking them for VD.

#### 

That was my job all the way up to the end of the war, until we returned to Japan. When we left, these women were abandoned on the spot.

# 05:15

Rape was rampant among soldiers. As soon as they found a woman, they would rape her.

#### 05:23

While reading all kind of things, I realized that if we don't face our past squarely, we're bound to repeat the same mistakes.

# 

When I look at (Prime Minister) Abe, I think he's starting to do exactly that. Someone needs to speak up.

#### 

And I feel that for as long as I'm alive, I should bear witness to what I saw, having made it to the age of 92.

#### 

In another 4 to 5 years those who experienced the war will all have died. I think my existence, right now, is precious.

#### 

That's why I speak out. Continuing to speak out is my mission, and that's what I'm doing.

06:07

# Jump to the following...

14:47

# 

Mr. Abe is insisting there was no coercion involved in the abduction of the women.

14;52

# 

Such a thing is not true! It's.....

14;58

Q \_\_\_\_\_

Nonsense?

15:00

Nonsense. A lie.

**David McNeill** writes for <u>The Independent</u> and other publications, including <u>The Irish</u> <u>Times</u>, <u>The Economist</u> and <u>The Chronicle of Higher Education</u>. An Asia-Pacific Journal coordinator, he is a coauthor of <u>Strong in the Rain</u>: Surviving Japan's Earthquake, Tsunami and Fukushima Nuclear Disaster (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

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