

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

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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. 25th) 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 70th anniversary of the end of World War II – and the 50th 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.

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.

02:04

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.

02:23

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

02:39

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

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.

03:50

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