

Comfort women: It's time for the truth (in the ordinary, everyday sense of the word)

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By Tessa Morris-Suzuki

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I. Introduction

Tessa Morris-Suzuki from the ANU writes that "the denial of responsibility for the fate of the 'comfort women' is, of course, an extremely important issue for Japan's relations with its Asian

neighbors and regional partners, including Australia." The Japanese government notes Morris-Suzuki, "seems unable to grasp the extent of the damage which comments such as Abe's cause to Japan's international image in many other countries, particularly those (like Australia) where memories of the war remain an emotive issue." The story concludes Morris-Suzuki, "is depressingly familiar. The victims this time are first and foremost the surviving 'comfort women' themselves, who are once again being insulted and denied justice by the morally bankrupt hair-splitting rhetoric of politicians. But the other group of victims is the Japanese people themselves, whose relationship with neighboring countries is being damaged by the short-sighted and inept behavior of their political leaders."

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II. Article by Tessa Morris-Suzuki

- "Comfort women: It's time for the truth (in the ordinary, everyday sense of the word)"
By Tessa Morris-Suzuki

In August 2000, the German Foundation Act established a fund to compensate tens of thousands of survivors of Nazi slave labour. The 5.1 billion Euro fund was financed jointly by the German government and companies which had been involved in the use of wartime slave labour, and by 2005, over 70,000 claims for compensation had been recognized. [1]

Some scholars of Japanese history object to the comparison between Japanese and German attitudes to war responsibility. And indeed, it is deeply misleading to make a simple dichotomy between a "good" Germany, which has faced up to its past, and a "bad" Japan, which has failed to do so. German attitudes to historical responsibility are complex and divided, and moreover in Germany a key issue is responsibility for the Holocaust, which has no obvious parallel in Japanese history.

In Japan, meanwhile, there are many determined and courageous scholars, journalists, lawyers and ordinary citizens who have fought for decades to persuade their own government to take responsibility for wartime wrongs. Their efforts deserve particular praise because they are carried on in difficult and often discouraging circumstances. Public intellectuals in Japan who raise issues of historical responsibility face a regular barrage of abusive messages, interspersed with threats of violence which the police rarely bother to treat as criminal offenses.

On the issue of forced labour, however, the contrast between Japan and Germany is illuminating. Japan too recruited very large numbers of forced labourers to work in its wartime mines and factories. In the Japanese case, a particularly dark aspect of this coercion was the forcible recruitment of women who were held in so-called "comfort stations" and subjected to rape and other forms of sexual abuse at the hands of the Japanese military.

Just as there is no dispute that Germany recruited forced labour, so too the fact that the "comfort stations" existed is not in doubt. But whereas the German government has acknowledged, apologized and paid compensation for forced labour, prominent Japanese politicians have repeatedly shown reluctance to acknowledge the forcible nature of Japanese wartime recruitment, both of labourers and of "comfort women". It is this latter issue that became headline news in the first week of March 2007.

A few weeks earlier, the US House of Representatives had begun debate on House Resolution 121, calling on the Japanese government to apologize and provide accurate public education about the wartime abuse of the "comfort women". [2] It was by no means the first time that Congress had debated such a resolution, but on this occasion the debate received a particularly large amount of international attention.

On March 1 Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzô responded to the Congress resolution by commenting that there was "no evidence" that the recruitment of "comfort women" had been "forcible in the narrow sense of the word". Speaking during a Diet committee debate a few days later, he reiterated this statement, clarifying the fact that, to be "forcible in the narrow sense of the word" the system would have had to involve "officials forcing their way into houses like kidnappers and taking people away". [3] Abe, however, clearly has no problem with the proposition that the recruitment of "comfort women" was forcible "in the broad sense of the word", and feels no historical responsibility for this, since he has made it clear that he and his government will not apologise whatever the outcome of the US Congressional resolution. [4] His Foreign Minister Aso Tarô has also attacked the US resolution, saying that it is "not based on the facts". [5]

Reading these remarks, I found myself imagining the international reaction to a German government which proposed that it had no historical responsibility for Nazi forced labour, on the grounds that this had not been "forcible in the narrow sense of the word". I also found myself in particular imagining how the world might react if one of the German ministers most actively engaged in this denial happened (for example) to be called Krupp, and to be a direct descendant of the industrial dynasty of that name.

The denial of responsibility for the fate of the "comfort women" is, of course, an extremely important issue for Japan's relations with its Asian neighbours and regional partners, including Australia. Australian former "comfort woman" Jan Ruff O'Herne is among those who gave moving first-hand testimony to the US Congress about her wartime experience of rape and abuse in a "comfort station". [6] Abe's enthusiasm for close ties with Australia has been widely reported, and his Prime Ministership is seen by some as marking the start of a new phase of the Australia-Japan partnership. Yet Japanese government seems unable to grasp the extent of the damage which comments such as Abe's and Aso's cause to Japan's international image, not only in Korea and China but also in many other countries, particularly those (like Australia) where memories of the war remain an emotive issue. The fate of Japanese citizens kidnapped by North Korea has aroused intense feeling in Japan in recent years, and Abe himself has been among those publicly moved to tears by their plight. One wonders, then, why Abe and his fellow ministers find it so hard to imagine that the stories of people like Jan Ruff O'Herne might stir similar emotions in Australia and other parts of our region.

Coercion and the Comfort Women

Though there is much confusion and controversy over the history of the "comfort stations", certain facts are clear. Military brothels were created all over the occupied areas of Asia during the war for the use of Japanese soldiers: the first were set up as early as 1932, but most were created after the outbreak of full-scale fighting in China in 1937. Some of these were managed by civilians for profit, but frequented by members of the Japanese armed forces; others were established and run directly by the Japanese military. Former Prime Minister Nakasone recalls in his memoirs authorizing the building of a "comfort station" on the island of Borneo for the use of men in his Naval Corps. [7]

The number of women recruited to work in these places is unknown - estimates vary from 20,000 to 400,000, though a careful study by historian Yoshimi Yoshiaki suggests a narrower range of between 50,000 and 200,000. (For a discussion of numbers, see Soh 2005) The methods of recruitment and the conditions which women faced also varied enormously. Some were Japanese women who had

worked as prostitutes previously, and were "volunteers" in a sense, although often driven to "volunteer" through pressures of poverty, debt and desperation. A very large number were women from Korea and China. Many had been lured away from their homes with promises of work in factories or restaurants, only to find themselves incarcerated in "comfort stations" in foreign lands. Other women in Korea, Southeast Asia and elsewhere were rounded up at gunpoint. Some were raped by soldiers before being herded into "comfort stations".

Many people were involved in the recruitment of "comfort women" - not only soldiers but also members of the Korean colonial police (working, of course, under Japanese command) and civilian brokers, who frequently used techniques of deception identical to those used by human traffickers today. Forced labour for mines and factories was recruited with the same mixture of outright violence, threats and false promises.

The evidence for this is the testimony of very large numbers of women who have come forward to tell their stories, despite the pain which they have endured and the stigma which they have had to overcome. Evidence also comes from the testimony of former members of the military who used the "comfort stations", and from those (like Nakasone) who were involved in establishing them. Though much documentation was destroyed (accidentally or deliberately) in the closing stages of the war, documents detailing the regulations and running of the "comfort stations", as well as surviving battlefield diaries, clearly reveal the involvement of the Japanese military in the creation and maintenance of the system. Further official documentation unearthed by Yoshimi Yoshiaki also confirms this fact. [\[8\]](#)

Between December 1991 and August 1993 the Japanese government conducted its own investigation of the comfort women issue. [\[9\]](#) On the basis of its findings, Japanese Foreign Minister Kôno Yôhei issued a statement on 4 August 1993 in which he stated that

"The recruitment of the comfort women was conducted mainly by private recruiters who acted in response to the request of the military. The Government study has revealed that in many cases they were recruited against their own will, through coaxing, coercion, etc., and that, at times, administrative/military personnel directly took part in the recruitments. They lived in misery at comfort stations under a coercive atmosphere."

Kôno went on to offer his government's "sincere apology and remorse" for the "immeasurable pain and incurable physical and psychological wounds" suffered by the "comfort women", and offered the following commitment:

"We shall face squarely the historical facts as described above instead of evading them, and take them to heart as lessons of history. We hereby reiterated our firm determination never to repeat the same mistake by forever engraving such issues in our memories through the study and teaching of history." [\[10\]](#)

Following this statement, in 1995 the Murayama government gave its support (but not funding) to the creation of an Asian Women's Fund, which collected donations from ordinary Japanese citizens to provide some monetary compensation to surviving victims of the scheme. Many victims, however, refused to accept this, standing by their principle that it was the duty of the Japanese government itself to pay compensation. (This fund is expected to cease existence when its mandate expires on 31 March 2007.)

In 1996, a Special Rapporteur appointed by the United Nations Commission on Human Rights issued a detailed report on the "comfort women" issue. Its conclusions are unequivocal:

"The Special Rapporteur is absolutely convinced that most of the women kept at the comfort stations were taken against their will, that the Japanese Imperial Army initiated, regulated and controlled the vast network of comfort stations, and that the Government of Japan is responsible for the comfort stations. In addition, the Government of Japan should be prepared to assume responsibility for what this implies under international law". [\[11\]](#)

Further testimony from former "comfort women" and others (including former members of the Japanese military who had visited "comfort stations") was collected by the Women's International War Crimes Tribunal, a public forum organized in 2000-2001 by Asian women's groups. A leading organizer of the Tribunal was the award-winning Japanese journalist Matsui Yayori (who died in 2002), and the evidence presented was assessed by international jurists including Gabrielle Kirk Macdonald, former president of the Yugoslavia War Crimes Tribunal. [\[12\]](#)

To summarise, then, not all "comfort women" were rounded up at gunpoint, but some were. Some were paid for "services", though many were not. Not all "comfort stations" were directly managed by the military. None of this, however, negates the fact that large numbers of women were violently forced, coerced or tricked into situations in which they suffered horrible sexual violence whose consequences affected their entire lives. I doubt if many of those who, "suffered immeasurable pain and incurable physical and psychological wounds" have spent a great deal of time worrying whether these wounds were the result of coercion in the "broad" or the "narrow" sense of the word.

And none of this makes the Japanese system any different from the Nazi forced labour system, which, in the words of one expert, was a complex amalgam of "shifting, contradictory policies and unpredictable turns, of volunteerism and wage offers as well as threats and beatings". [\[13\]](#)

The Legacies of Violence

While the US Congress has been debating its resolution on the "Comfort Women" issue, a group of conservative Japanese parliamentarians - members of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party - have been lobbying to have the government publicly disavow Kôno's apology. Their argument (closely echoed in Abe's comments) is that there is no need for such an apology since comfort women were "forcibly taken away against their will by commercial agents, but they were not forcibly taken away by the military or officials." [\[14\]](#)

This denial goes hand-in-hand with an insistence that those demanding justice for the "comfort women" are just a bunch of biased and ill-informed "Japan-bashers". An article by journalist Komori Yoshihisa in the conservative Sankei newspaper, for example, reports that the US Congress resolution is "based on a complaint which presumes that all the comfort women were directly conscripted by the Japanese army, and that the statements by Kôno and Murayama were not clear apologies." [\[15\]](#)

Komori does not appear to have read the resolution with much attention. House Resolution 121 (whose main sponsor is Michael Honda, an American of Japanese ancestry who experienced incarceration in a US wartime internment camp) certainly refers to the "Imperial Army's Coercion of young women into sexual slavery", but nowhere does it suggest that all the recruitment was carried out by the armed forces. On the contrary, its wording carefully describes the Japanese government as having "officially commissioned the acquisition of young women for the sole purpose of sexual servitude to its Imperial Armed Forces". (emphasis added) The resolution also goes on to commend "those Japanese officials and private citizens whose hard work and compassion resulted in the establishment in 1995 of Japan's private Asian Women's Fund", and to refer to the 1993 Kôno apology. However, it expresses alarm at moves to rescind the apology, and at the closing down of the Asian Women's Fund, and in that context calls on the Japanese government to renew its apology

and disseminate information about the history of the "comfort women". In essence, then, the Resolution demands that the Japanese government fulfil Kôno's promises. [\[16\]](#)

Given the Congressional resolution's careful use of words and its recognition of past Japanese apologies, it is hard to see how Foreign Minister Aso can dismiss it as "having no basis in fact". But then again, Aso may prefer that the facts were not examined too closely. As British journalist Christopher Reed has reported, Aso himself is a scion and former branch manager of the Aso mining conglomerate, which during wartime employed many thousands of Korean forced labourers, as well as using the labour of at least 300 Allied prisoners-of-war (101 British, 197 Australians and 3 Dutch) in its Yoshikuma coal mine. [\[17\]](#)

What purpose do Abe's and Aso's denials serve? Certainly not the purpose of helping defeat the US Congress resolution. Their statements have in fact seriously embarrassed those US Congress members who are opposed to the resolution. [\[18\]](#) The main strategy of these US opponents of Resolution 121 was the argument that Japanese government had already apologized adequately for the sufferings of the "comfort women", and that there was no need to take the matter further. By their retreat from remorse, Abe and Aso have succeeded in neatly cutting the ground from beneath the feet of their closest US allies.

The Politics of Denial

Confusingly, Abe does insist that, despite his doubts about the "forcible" nature of the system, he is not actually retracting the Kôno apology. But, rather than reassuring critics, this equivocation has simply served to highlight the reasons why Japanese politicians' apologies for the war have tended to be regarded with skepticism by Japan's neighbours. Because they have been individual apologies - and have never yet been backed up by significant packages of compensation to victims or significant programs of public education on historical responsibility - statements like Kôno's (however well-intentioned they may be) have proved to be all too easily modified, parsed, re-interpreted, hedged around with conditions or simply abandoned by the next group of people to come to power.

Abe, of course, has his own history in relation to this issue. Early in 2001, the Japanese national broadcaster NHK made a documentary program about the recently-concluded Women's International War Crimes Tribunal. A few days before the program was due to go to air, NHK's Executive Director General of Broadcasting had a meeting with Abe, who was then Deputy Chief Cabinet Secretary. They discussed the content of the documentary, and immediately after, the program's producers were instructed by NHK management to make last minute alterations which substantially weakened the critical tone of the program.

Four years later, the issue became headline news when an NHK whistleblower came forward to say that Abe Shinzô had exerted direct pressure on the national broadcaster to have the content of the program changed (an intervention which would have violated Japan's public broadcasting regulations). Abe, who admitted discussing the program with NHK staff, denied that his meeting had constituted "political pressure". (Should that have been "political pressure in the narrow sense of the word"?) The story caused a political furore, in which most of the mass media focused on attacking the credibility of the whistleblower.

The only people to be disciplined for wrong-doing as a result of the affair were the NHK whistleblower and the journalist who reported the story, veteran Asahi journalist Honda Masakazu, who was subjected to a barrage of criticism, slur and innuendo by the conservative media, and removed from his senior reporting post by his superiors. [\[19\]](#)

Meanwhile, Abe went on to become Prime Minister, boosted by his credentials as an enthusiastic

nationalist both in relation to issues of history and memory, and in relation to the problem of Japanese citizens kidnapped by North Korea. [20] Since coming to power, however, Abe has disappointed his more hawkish backers. In November 2006, he made conciliatory gestures to China, setting up a joint Japan-China committee to study the problems of history which have long plagued the relations between the two countries. More seriously still, the outcome of the Six Party Talks in Beijing has left Japan's Abe administration relatively isolated in its hard-line stance toward North Korea, and raised the prospect that Japan may need to alter its approach to resolving the kidnap issue. Abe's apparently vacillating policies and failure to make significant policy impact on major Japanese economic and social problems have seen his personal popularity plummet. His comments on the "comfort women" issue must be seen in the context of a desire to re-establish his credentials with the Japanese right, particularly in the lead-up to crucial parliamentary elections, scheduled for July.

The story is depressingly familiar. Historical truth is being sacrificed to short-term political expediency. The victims this time are first and foremost the surviving "comfort women" themselves, who are once again being insulted and denied justice by the morally bankrupt hair-splitting rhetoric of politicians. But the other group of victims is the Japanese people themselves, whose relationship with neighbouring countries is being damaged by the short-sighted and inept behaviour of their political leaders. Reading the news over the past few days, I have been remembering Matsui Yayori, who to the day of her death fought so courageously for truth and justice, and thinking of historians like Yoshimi Yoshiaki and journalists like Honda Masakazu. Both the former "comfort women" and Japanese people like these surely deserve better.

End notes

[1] See International Organisation for Migration, German Forced Labour Compensation Program. <http://www.compensation-for-forced-labour.org/english-home.html>

[2] Kim Se Jeong. "Comfort Women Testify to US Congress". Ohmynews International 17 February, 2007. http://english.ohmynews.com/ArticleView/article_view.asp?menu=A11100&no=345932&rel_no=1

[3] Mainichi Shimbun, evening edition, 5 March 2005.

[4] See Nikkei Sokuhô Nyûsu, 5 March 2007.

[5] BBC News, 19 February 2007, "Japan anger at US sex slave bill" <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/6374961.stm>

[6] See Statement of Jan Ruff O'Herne AO, Friends of "Comfort Women" in Australia, Subcommittee on Asia, the Pacific, and the Global Environment Committee on Foreign Affairs, U.S. House of Representatives Hearing on Protecting the Human Rights of "Comfort Women", Thursday, February 15, 2007. <http://www.internationalrelations.house.gov/110/ohe021507.htm>

[7] See Soh Chang-Hee, Sarah. "Teikoku Nihon no 'Jûgun Ianfu Seido' Ron: Rekishi to Kioku no Seijiteki Kattô". In Kurasawa Aiko et al eds. Iwanami Kôza: Ajia Taiheyô Sensô. Vol. 2. Tokyo: Iwanami, 2005, pp.347-380.

[8] Yoshimi Yoshiaki, Comfort Women: Sexual Slavery in the Japanese Military During World War II. (trans Suzanne O'Brian), Columbia: Columbia University Press, 2000, particularly pp. 58-61 and 113-115.

[9] For a summary of the study's findings see Cabinet Councillors' Office on External Affairs, On

the Issue of Wartime "Comfort Women", Ministry of Foreign Affairs, August 4, 1993.

<http://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/postwar/issue9308.html>

[10] For the full text of Kôno's statement, see Statement by the Chief Cabinet Secretary Yohei Kono on the result of the study on the issue of "comfort women", August 4, 1993.

<http://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/women/fund/state9308.html>

[11] For the text of the Special Rapporteur's report, see Report of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences, Ms. Radhika Coomaraswamy, in accordance with Commission on Human Rights resolution 1994/45 Report on the mission to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, the Republic of Korea and Japan on the issue of military sexual slavery in wartime, United Nations, Economic and Social Council E/CN.4/1996/53/Add. 1/Corr. 1, 7 February 1996. <http://www.comfort-women.org/coomaras.htm>

[12] For details of the Tribunal, see VAWW-NET Japan (Violence Against Women in War-Network Japan), The Women's International War Crimes Tribunal on Japan's Military Sexual Slavery.

<http://www1.jca.apc.org/vaww-net-japan/english/womenstribunal2000/whatstribunal.html>

[13] Mark Wyman, DP: Europe's Displaced Persons, 1945-1951. Philadelphia: Balch Institute Press, 1989, p. 22.

[14] Tokyo Shinbun, 1 March 2007.

[15] Sankei Shinbun, 3 March 2007.

[16] For the text of the Resolution, see H. Res. 121: Expressing the sense of the House of Representatives that the Government of Japan should formally...

<http://www.govtrack.us/congress/billtext.xpd?bill=hr110-121> For video of Honda's testimony to Congress, see Honda Testifies in Support of Comfort Women.

http://www.house.gov/apps/list/press/ca15_honda/comfortwomentestimony.html

[17] Christopher Reed, "Family Skeletons: Japan's Foreign Minister and Forced Labor by Koreans and Allied POWs". Japan Focus. 6 May 2006. <http://www.japanfocus.org/products/details/1627>

[18] Sankei Shinbun 5 March 2007.

[19] See Tessa Morris-Suzuki, "Free Speech, Silenced Voices: The Japanese Media and the NHK Affair". AsiaRights. 4, 2005. <http://rspas.anu.edu.au/asiarightsjournal/Morris-Suzuki.pdf>

[20] On the kidnap issue, see Gavan McCormack and Wada, Haruki, "The Strange Record of 15 Years of Japan-North Korea Negotiations". Japan Focus, 2 September 2005.

<http://www.japanfocus.org/products/details/1894>

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