The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus
In-depth critical analysis of the forces shaping the Asia-Pacific...and the world.

Responsibility Denied: Japan's Debate Over the Comfort Women

Violence Against Women in War-NET Japan

On March 29, 2007, members of the Japan Acton Network for the 'Comfort Woman' Issue, accompanied by three Diet representatives, visited the Cabinet Office to submit letters of protest against Prime Minister Abe Shinzo's series of statements denying Japanese governmental involvement in coercing the comfort women into the military's wartime system of sexual slavery. They also raised concern over efforts to revise the 1993 "Kono Statement."

Japan Focus is making available in translation some of the key documents in a controversy that has spilled over into the international arena. VAWW-NET Japan's letter powerfully draws attention to the fundamental issue at stake: what counts as truth, and who has the right speak concerning modern Japanese history.

Also find below the full text of the 1993 "Kono Statement" as it appears in English translation on the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs website. Following these two documents, find links to major stories that Focus has published on related topics, which we hope will be useful to those currently researching and teaching the issues. (JF)

Open Letter to Prime Minister Abe Shinzo

26 March 2007

Dear Prime Minister Abe,

It has now been seventeen years since the surviving women of Japan's system of military sexual slavery broke their silence and called on the government of Japan for a clear apology and compensation. For them, the 1993 "Kono Statement" was but an opening towards remedying their long-suffered damage. Since the "Statement" was first issued, survivors have repeatedly called on the government of Japan to implement what is acknowledged by it and the commitment the government made in it in a manner acceptable to them. Many survivors rejected the Asian Women's Fund's "atonement" money because they were unable to feel genuine "apology" or "remorse" in it.

The government of Japan claims it has "apologized many times". But what is the meaning of apology when it fails to reach the heart of those to whom it is made? Apology is not an alibi. The few surviving women do not want token words or charity money. They want an apology that would finally restore their sense of dignity. They also seek compensation with an unequivocal acceptance of the government's state responsibility for its past wrongdoing.

Prime Minister Abe, you have seized on the opportunity of the introduction of the "comfort women" resolution in the U.S. House of Representatives on January 31, 2007 to make public your long-held theory of breaking "coercion" into two categories: in the "narrow sense" and the "broad sense." You define the "narrow sense of coercion" as "government authorities breaking into private homes and taking [women] like kidnappers". You have openly stated that "it is a fact that no evidence was found to support the coercion as initially defined", and that "there is no evidence that [the government or military] forcibly recruited and managed [the women]."

As such, we have the following questions for you:

1. On the issue of coercion, the "Kono Statement", to which you have publicly declared that you will adhere, states that "in many cases their recruitment, transfer, control, etc., were conducted generally against their will, through coaxing, coercion, etc.", and that "at times, administrative/military personnel directly took part in the recruitments." The "Statement", therefore, expresses the view that, as far as the "comfort stations" are concerned, the women there were made into "comfort women" under coercion. Are we to understand from your public statements that you mean to change the definition of coercion from what is expressed in the "Kono Statement"? If so, please state the grounds and reasons for such a change.

2. While denying that the military forcibly recruited women, Prime Minister Abe has asserted that private agents and not the military itself coerced the women, by stating that, "in some cases the go-between private agents coerced the women in effect so that there was coercion in the broad sense". Please explain in an unambiguous manner what it is you mean when you say that, while you deny the military involvement as acknowledged by the "Kono Statement", you "adhere to" the "Kono Statement".

3. Prime Minister Abe has asserted that "there is no testimony establishing that there was anything like the forcible taking [of the women] such as 'a hunt for comfort women by officials'". There are many women, however, who were forcibly thrust into sexual slavery through abduction or threat among those made into "comfort women" throughout Asia. In particular, most cases in occupied areas such as in China and the Philippines involve abduction. Whose and what kind of testimony do you mean when you refer to testimony that fails to "establish" coercion? Also, as regards the testimony of the survivors that you have heard, please explain in full, whose testimony and about what? In addition, please make clear your view about survivor testimony in general: do you believe it all to be lies?

4. The "Kono Statement" reads as follows: "The Government of Japan would like to take this opportunity once again to extend its sincere apologies and remorse to all those, irrespective of place of origin, who suffered immeasurable pain and incurable physical and psychological wounds as comfort women." Prime Minister Abe claims that the testimony of the survivors is "not established". If this is so, please clarify what "sincere apologies and remorse" as expressed in the "Kono Statement" and to which the Prime Minister has vowed to uphold are all about? In the Prime Minister's understanding, to whom are these apologies made and for what is there remorse?

5. The "Kono Statement" reads as follows: "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." Please express in an unambiguous manner that this commitment as expressed in the "Kono Statement" is also the commitment of the Prime Minister himself. Furthermore, recording this issue in textbooks and teaching it to younger generations must be a part of the commitment expressed in the "Kono Statement". Please explain the Prime Minister's views and thoughts concerning references to "comfort women" in textbooks and the teaching the issue in junior high schools.

We are profoundly concerned that the Prime Minister Abe's recent statements have brought further pain to the survivors and a significant divide in building peace and trust throughout Asia. To reconsider one's own past wrongdoing and to face responsibility is not a matter of self-torment or shame. To deny perpetration and evade responsibility, by contrast, is. If Japan does this, then it is not a beautiful country. It is ugly. We demand that Prime Minister Abe face the "Kono Statement", and as an obligation of the highest authority of the present government of Japan, start moving as soon as possible towards making an official apology to the surviving women and fulfilling the government's responsibility in a clear manner.

Please send the reply to the questions above by facsimile to VAWW-NET Japan at 03-3818-5903. We look forward to your response on or before April 4, 2007.

Violence Against Women in War-Network Japan (VAWW-NET Japan)

Co-chairpersons: Nishino Rumiko, Shoji Rutsuko

Signed by all members of the Steering Committee

Statement by Chief Cabinet Secretary Kono Yohei on the issue of the "comfort women"

August 4, 1993

The Government of Japan has been conducting a study on the issue of wartime "comfort women" since December 1991. I wish to announce the findings as a result of that study.

As a result of the study which indicates that comfort stations were operated in extensive areas for long periods, it is apparent that there existed a great number of comfort women. Comfort stations were operated in response to the request of the military authorities of the day. The then Japanese military was, directly or indirectly, involved in the establishment and management of the comfort stations and the transfer of comfort women. 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.

As to the origin of those comfort women who were transferred to the war areas, excluding those from Japan, those from the Korean Peninsula accounted for a large part. The Korean Peninsula was under Japanese rule in those days, and their recruitment, transfer, control, etc., were conducted generally against their will, through coaxing, coercion, etc.

Undeniably, this was an act, with the involvement of the military authorities of the day, that severely injured the honor and dignity of many women. The Government of Japan would like to take this opportunity once again to extend its sincere apologies and remorse to all those, irrespective of place of origin, who suffered immeasurable pain and incurable physical and psychological wounds as comfort women.

It is incumbent upon us, the Government of Japan, to continue to consider seriously, while listening to the views of learned circles, how best we can express this sentiment.

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.
As actions have been brought to court in Japan and interests have been shown in this issue outside Japan, the Government of Japan shall continue to pay full attention to this matter, including private researched related thereto.

This article was posted at Japan Focus on March 31, 2007.

Related Japan Focus articles:

Tessa Morris-Suzuki:

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

Free Speech – Silenced Voices: The Japanese Media, the Comfort Women Tribunal, and the NHK Affair

Norma Field:

The Courts, Japan's 'Military Comfort Women,' and the Conscience of Humanity: The Ruling in VAWW-Net Japan v. NHK

Alexis Dudden:

Abe's Violent Denial: Japan's Prime Minister and the Comfort Women

The End of Apology

Hayashi Hirofumi:

Government, the Military and Business in Japan's Wartime Comfort Woman System

Ito Ruri:

Engendering the Concept of Peace: on Violence Against Women

Created by Datamomentum