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New Era for Japan-Korea History Issues: Forced Labor Redress Efforts Begin to Bear Fruit

William Underwood

Historical issues involving Japan and South Korea have entered a new phase with the inauguration in Seoul on February 25 of a conservative president and the repatriation in January of the remains of 101 Koreans who died while forcibly serving in the Japanese military during World War II.

President Lee Myung Bak has said he “does not want to tell Japan to apologize or engage in self-reflection,” calling instead for future-oriented ties and a “mature relationship” with Japan. Lee replaced President Roh Moo Hyun, who spoke of a “diplomatic war” with Tokyo over history.

Yet the tough stance of the previous president, coupled with vigorous cross-border activism involving South Korean and Japanese citizens, has begun yielding results. Tokyo is cooperating “on humanitarian grounds” in resolving some historical legacies, but it is digging in its heels on many others.

Japan's mixed track record prior to and during the Roh era is most evident in the case of wartime labor conscription. Roughly 700,000 Koreans were forced to work for private companies within Japan. More than 300,000 Koreans were forced to serve in the Japanese military in fighting and support roles; 22,182 are known to have died.

On January 22, the remains of 101 Korean military conscripts killed in nearly a dozen countries were returned to South Korea from Yutenji Temple in Tokyo, following an official memorial ceremony attended by high-ranking diplomats from Japan and South Korea. The Japanese government, for the first time, invited 50 South Korean family members to attend the ceremony—paying their travel and lodging expenses and providing about \$300 in condolence money for each fatality. The South Korean government extended similar condolence payments.

South Korea's ambassador to Japan called the repatriation of the remains a “valuable start to heal historical wounds.” The 1,034 sets of Korean bones still stored at Yutenji Temple are slated to be returned later this year to South Korea and perhaps, subsequently, to North Korea, the ancestral home of 431 of the war dead. The remains belong mostly to military conscripts killed on overseas battlefields, but they include civilians (some of them women and children) who died in the accidental sinking of the *Ukushima-maru* transport ship soon after the war.

During the Yutenji memorial ceremony, a Japanese government representative expressed “deep remorse and apology” for suffering inflicted upon Koreans under Japanese colonial rule from 1910 to 1945, quoting from the written apology offered by former Prime Minister Obuchi Keizo to former President Kim Dae Jung in 1998.

Access to the main ceremony, however, was tightly restricted by the Japanese government. Media personnel, members of Japanese activist and religious groups, and even a current Japanese Diet member were barred from attending. Japan's Foreign Ministry claimed in the days before the event that South Korean family members had requested the private service, but this depiction was rejected by the South Korean government. Larger, more inclusive memorial rites were held for the war victims on January 23 at the [Manhyange Dongsan national cemetery](#) in Chonan, South Korea.



Memorial services for Korean remains repatriated from Japan six decades after World War II were conducted in a variety of religious traditions at the Manhyange Dongsan national cemetery in South Korea in January. (Nanba Koji photos)

Returning Korean military conscript remains has been a fitful, decades-long process. Japan reportedly sent 6,000 sets of remains to South Korea during the Occupation under American supervision, followed by an additional 8,800 sets in 1969. Using military name rosters supplied by Japan, Seoul authorities during the 1970s worked to track down relatives and return remains, but a public backlash ensued because Tokyo provided bereaved families with no apologies and only inexpensive obituary gifts.

This helped to derail the remains repatriation process within South Korea and essentially stranded the bones now at Yutenji Temple, which had been stored in the compound of Japan's Health Ministry until 1971. It has also recently come to light that Japanese officials attempted to send the Yutenji remains to both South Korea and North Korea in the 1970s. Seoul's anti-communist regime, however, blocked the plan because it might have led to warmer North Korea-Japan relations.

Former Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro promised former President Roh at their December 2004 summit meeting that Japan would promptly return the Yutenji bones and assist South Korea's broader efforts to settle forced labor issues. But reparations work bogged down due to emotional history disputes that erupted in 2005, scuttling what was supposed to be a “Year of Friendship” marking 40 years of restored diplomatic ties. The main flashpoints were Koizumi's visits to Yasukuni Shrine, Japanese history textbooks, and the ownership of a group of tiny islets (known as Dokdo in the East Sea to Koreans and Takeshima in the Sea of Japan to Japanese).

Roh stated that Japan's forced labor and comfort women systems were tens of thousands of times worse than the abductions of Japanese citizens by North Korea in the 1970s and 80s. He repeatedly charged that Japan had failed to live up to global norms of morality concerning historical wrongdoing, and

suggested that legal claims by A-bomb survivors, former comfort women and former conscripts abandoned on Sakhalin Island have not been resolved.

South Korea's 85-member [Truth Commission on Forced Mobilization under Japanese Imperialism](#) has received over 220,000 statements from elderly former conscripts or family members since 2005. Among the 60,000 cases of forcible conscription certified so far are Koreans who were convicted of Class B and C war crimes stemming from mistreatment of Allied prisoners of war. The commission described the men as "double victims" whose honor should be restored.

Public hearings held across South Korea have helped former conscripts reclaim their dignity and produced a historical record of the forced labor experience—along with a list of more than 2,000 Japanese firms that benefited. Oral histories have been published, in Korean and Japanese, and a documentary movie is being planned. A truth commission [website](#) helps former conscripts locate wartime companions, with the site's database of high-resolution photos being searchable by year of conscription, destination and type of work. The South Korean government plans to eventually open a forced labor museum and research center, most likely in the southeastern city of Pusan.

Last fall the Truth Commission on Forced Mobilization reported that Yasukuni Shrine has inaccurately listed the names of 60 Koreans among the rolls of Imperial Japanese war dead. Forty-seven of the Koreans were confirmed to have died after World War II, but 13 are still alive. Shrine officials, however, refuse to remove the names of individuals once they have been enshrined. Yasukuni received the names of Korean military fatalities from the Japanese government, which never attempted to notify Korean families of their relatives' fates.

Guided by local Japanese activists, Korean truth commission members have also conducted fact-finding investigations at former mines and construction sites across Japan where civilian conscripts toiled and frequently died. The ambitious goal is to find, identify and repatriate the remains of forced laborers still in Japan.

The Japanese government claims, despite much historical evidence to the contrary, that the state was never directly involved in labor conscription by Japanese companies. On this basis, Tokyo insists it does not know how many Korean civilians were conscripted or how many died in the custody of private firms—and displays little interest in finding out.

In addition to the Yutenji bones, some 2,000 sets of civilian Korean remains have been located in Japanese temples and charnel houses since 2005, following a Japanese government request to corporations, municipalities and religious bodies to supply information. Hundreds of the remains may belong to forced laborers who died during the war. But most probably belong to Koreans who died before or after the conscription years (1939-1945) or were not labor conscripts; the latter category would apply to perhaps two-thirds of the two million or so Koreans in Japan at war's end. South Korean and Japanese officials have jointly inspected charnel houses containing a small number of these civilian remains. Most Japanese companies are declining to assist researchers.



Left: Community researchers in August 2006 describe a former Mitsubishi coal mine in Iizuka, Fukuoka, to South Korean truth commission members and Korean relatives of a forced laborer who died in a wartime explosion there. Right: Historical rendering of the Mitsubishi Iizuka mine tower from the landmark's signboard. (William Underwood photos)

The Roh administration in 2005 made public all 35,000 pages of diplomatic records involving the 1965 treaty that normalized relations with Japan, setting a new regional standard for information disclosure. The accord provided Seoul with the equivalent of \$500 million in grants and loans, but it also states that claims "concerning property, rights and interests" of the South Korean government and its citizens "have been settled completely and finally." Disclosure of the records cemented the public perception that the treaty's "economic cooperation" formula had betrayed the countless individual Koreans harmed by Japanese colonialism.

In response, Roh spearheaded the passage in November 2007 of a law granting compensation from South Korean coffers to individual victims of wartime forced labor. The measure will provide just over \$20,000 to families of military and civilian conscripts who died or went missing outside of Korea; conscripts who returned to Korea with disabling injuries; and families of conscripts who returned to Korea with injuries and died later. Payouts are expected to begin in May 2008.

In addition to fixed-amount compensation, the new law also calls for the South Korean state to make individualized payments to former conscripts and families based on financial deposits now held by the Bank of Japan (BOJ)—money that forced laborers earned but never received. The 60-year-old deposits consist largely of unpaid wages, pension contributions, and death and disability benefits for both civilian and military conscripts.

Partly to discourage Koreans from fleeing worksites in wartime Japan, companies funneled their salaries into "patriotic savings accounts" and made mandatory deductions for the national welfare pension fund. Japan's Welfare Ministry ordered companies to deposit all unpaid sums for civilian conscripts into the national treasury in October 1946. American Occupation officials approved of the Japanese government directive, which was considered a first step toward remunerating the large numbers of ex-conscripts in Japan and Korea. The former industrial workers were viewed as a potentially destabilizing force in both societies precisely because they had been harshly mistreated and then cheated out of their pay.

Wages for Korean soldiers and support personnel conscripted into the military were similarly deposited into postal savings accounts during the war. Japanese authorities deposited salary arrears and related benefits for Korean (and Taiwanese) military conscripts into the BOJ in February 1950. Japan's Finance Ministry reported the total amount of these deposits to Occupation officials later that year, with the figures broken down by branch of military service.

It has only recently become clear that the Japanese government prior to 1965 made extensive preparations to compensate the families of Koreans killed while serving with the armed forces, even earmarking funds for this purpose in the national budget. Likewise, the original intent of the civilian deposit system was to disburse to workers the funds they had earned. The final form of the normalization treaty, however, sidestepped the question of compensating individuals for

conscription and recast reparations as a purely state-level diplomatic issue. The South Korean government was aware, at least in a general sense, of Japan's two postwar deposit schemes.

The Koizumi administration conceded in response to Diet questioning in 2004 that the Bank of Japan continues to possess more than 2 million yen in [financial deposits](#) related to Korean labor conscription. The [deposits](#) could be worth \$2 billion today, if adjusted for six decades of interest and inflation. Japanese courts have confirmed the existence of wage and pension deposits in individual cases, while ruling that the 1965 treaty nullified the rights of Korean plaintiffs to claim the money. Judges have also found that the Japanese state never notified or attempted to notify ex-conscripts or families about the deposits, even when it would have been possible to do so.

The future status of these financial deposits, which remain shrouded in secrecy and are virtually unknown to the Japanese public, represents a major piece of unfinished reparations business. Japan's commitment to historical reconciliation is now being tested by South Korean requests for details about the deposits and other aspects of labor conscription.

Seoul will not be able to fully implement its domestic compensation program without fuller Japanese cooperation at least in providing records. The South Korean truth commission has requested Japanese welfare pension records in order to verify that applicants for compensation were conscripted during the war. To provide individually tailored payments, the commission will also need a Japanese document known as the Unpaid Financial Deposits Report.

At a state-level [conference](#) last December, Japanese officials reportedly supplied their Korean counterparts with name rosters and, for the first time, financial deposit information for 11,000 military conscripts. Japan is inching toward open discussion of the deposits based on the understanding that Tokyo is not legally responsible for wartime conscription and the money will not be released. However, the Japanese side stated that similar data for the far larger class of civilian conscripts is dispersed across Japan and would be difficult for the central government to compile.

This double standard is consistent with Japan's past practice, for foreigners as well as Japanese nationals, of privileging the status of military victims of the Asia Pacific War over civilian ones. Since 2006 the Japanese government has footed half the bill for memorial visits by Korean family members to battle sites in Okinawa and six South Pacific nations where their conscripted relatives died. There is no similar program for visits to places in Japan where civilian laborers perished.

Neither is the Japanese government helping to send the bones of civilian conscripts home to Korea. In late February, a citizens group called the Hokkaido Forum returned the remains of three Korean teenagers killed at Nippon Steel's Muroran foundry in July 1945 during an American naval bombardment, along with the remains of a fourth conscript who died at a nearby coal mine during the war. The government rejected the group's request for an official representative to attend the Muroran memorial service and for travel expenses, funeral expenses and condolence money to be paid to visiting relatives—as in the case of the Yutenji Temple remains in January.

Repatriation of all civilian conscript remains in Japan could take years. Community activists say the project should include compensation, apologies by the state and corporations involved, and explanations about causes of death. Systematic government cooperation concerning cremation records and domicile registries would greatly speed up the work of identifying remains. But local authorities in some cases are withholding such dusty data on privacy grounds, a practice that activists say shields Japanese companies by masking deaths on the job.

A Fukuoka-based citizens group called the [Truth-Seeking Network for Forced Mobilization](#) was formed in 2005 to facilitate the work of the South Korean government's truth commission within Japan. A month-long project in 2006 featured public memorial rites and symposiums at 27 sites nationwide, as well as visits by 20 Korean relatives of conscripted workers who died in Japan. More than 200 people excavated a communal grave in an open field in Hokkaido, containing the remains of 10 Koreans who died while constructing an airfield and were apparently cremated on the spot.



Identifying the bones of Korean forced laborers exhumed in August 2006 from a field in Sarufutsu village, Hokkaido. (Peacetown photos)

Beginning in 1991, dozens of compensation lawsuits have been filed in Japanese courts against private companies and the Japanese state for civilian and military conscription. Related litigation demanding apology and compensation has involved Koreans who were forced into military sexual slavery, exposed to the atomic bombings, killed in the Ukishima-maru accident, convicted of Class B and C war crimes, abandoned on Sakhalin Island, interned in Siberia, and enshrined in Yasukuni against their families' wishes.

Virtually all of these legal efforts have failed due to the claims waiver language in the Japan-South Korea treaty and time limits for filing claims. A decision by the Toyama District Court in September 2007 was typical. Judges dismissed the suit by elderly female plaintiffs, but agreed that as teenagers they had been threatened or deceived into going to Japan and then forced to work at a factory where they were confined without pay. Three companies—New Nippon Steel, NKK, and Nachi-Fujikoshi—have compensated a handful of Korean forced labor victims over the past decade in isolated cases through out-of-court settlements. Led by Mitsubishi, Japan's top wartime munitions manufacturer, Japanese industry has otherwise evaded all responsibility for the massive forced labor program.

In an unprecedented ruling in November 2007, the [Japan Supreme Court](#) found that the government's refusal to provide health-care benefits to A-bomb survivors living overseas is illegal, and ordered the state to pay damages. The top court confirmed that the plaintiffs had been forcibly taken from Korea and forced to work for Mitsubishi Heavy Industries in Hiroshima, but rejected their demand for back salary. In a December 2007 decision that could aid reparations activities, the [Tokyo District Court](#) ruled that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs violated Japan's information disclosure law by failing to respond in a timely manner to a request for documents concerning the 1965 accord. The Japanese government has appealed the decision.

More than 600 elderly Koreans were moved—at Japanese expense—from Sakhalin to South Korea [last October](#), in the latest phase of a program that has resettled 2,300 people since 1992. Japan denies official responsibility for encouraging or coercing as many as 150,000 Koreans to move to Sakhalin before 1945, but Tokyo has quietly spent millions of dollars building a special village for the repatriates in South Korea. Late last year a dozen Sakhalin Koreans, now living in Sakhalin, South Korea and Japan, filed a new lawsuit seeking the refund of money they deposited into postal savings and postal life insurance accounts when the island was part of the Japanese empire.

The tens of thousands of Korean "comfort women" represent an egregious class of forced labor outside the formal conscription system. In operation from 1995 to 2006, the [Asian Women's Fund](#) (AWF) was a landmark initiative by Japanese standards of postwar responsibility, extending prime ministerial apologies and compensation from private sources. But only about 300 women across East Asia accepted the payments due to deep suspicions about Japanese sincerity. The response by Japanese citizens to the government's appeal for AWF donations was embarrassingly weak; it is likely that much of the private funding was covertly provided by the Japanese government, whose overriding concern was avoiding legal responsibility. The South Korean government has offered financial assistance and medical benefits to former comfort women since 1993.

Last year former Prime Minister Abe Shinzo suggested that comfort women had not been forced into providing sex for Japan's military. Abe first implicitly repudiated, then under international pressure explicitly supported, the Kono Statement of 1993 acknowledging direct military involvement. The firestorm of [controversy](#) prompted national legislatures in North America and Europe to pass resolutions calling on Japan to do more to repair the injustice. In Seoul last month, the eight hundredth "Wednesday demonstration" was held in front of the Japanese Embassy, demanding more robust apologies and compensation based on legal culpability.

North Korea is obviously a central player in Japanese-Korean reconciliation efforts. Pyongyang has often undermined redress efforts through exaggerated propaganda, nuclear weapons development, missile launches and, above all, the abduction of Japanese nationals. Japan is currently excluding North Korea from the remains repatriation process, and North Korean relatives of deceased conscripts have been barred from entering the country to take part in community events.

Tokyo has been trying since the early 1990s to normalize relations with Pyongyang using the economic assistance strategy it employed with Seoul. But North Korea has insisted on formal state reparations for war and colonial responsibility. Around ten percent of forced laborers came from northern Korea and their compensation claims, for damages as well as the salary arrears essentially being held in escrow by Japan's treasury, remain open. While the Japanese government is keeping silent about its ultimate plans for the BOJ financial deposits, it seems clear that the funds will remain frozen until ties with North Korea are established.



Late 1970s photos of the former Akasaka coal mine in Fukuoka operated by Aso Mining, the family firm of previous Japanese Foreign Minister Aso Taro, and a Korean forced to work there during the war. Aso Mining used an estimated 12,000 Koreans, as well as 300 Allied prisoners of war, for forced labor. (Hayashi Eidai photos)

President Lee Myung Bak vowed during his election campaign to roll back key features of the past ten years of liberal leadership in South Korea, especially the "Sunshine Policy" of tolerant engagement with the north that the Roh administration inherited from his predecessor Kim Dae Jung. Lee indicated during the presidential transition that he will allow the Truth Commission on Forced Mobilization to expire when its funding mandate ends in late 2008. Although Lee was elected on a primarily economic platform, one reason for the rise of South Korea's "New Right" is waning public support for the state's 14 historical commissions, several of which target colonial-era collaboration with Japan. Lee and Japanese Prime Minister Fukuda Yasuo have agreed to resume reciprocal summit meetings this spring.

Lee himself was born in Japan in 1941 to voluntary Korean immigrants who returned to their homeland in 1946. He was jailed in 1964 for taking part in student demonstrations against the South Korean government and the treaty with Japan. Two years from now, he will oversee commemorations of Japan's annexation of Korea in 1910, an event that promises to be both painful and cathartic.

The global trend toward repairing historical injustices offers few parallels for the recent direct involvement of the South Korean government in redress efforts targeting a neighboring democratic state. Japanese and Korean civil society actors will try to maintain the momentum of the Roh years and continue healing the scars of forced labor. The effect upon Japanese-Korean reconciliation of Lee's weaker commitment to reparations remains to be seen.

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Note on Sources

Much of this article is based on unpublished information obtained from the [Kyosei Doin Shinso Kyumei Nettowaku](#) (Truth-Seeking Network for Forced Mobilization), a Japanese group comprised of leading academic historians and community-based researchers. The Truth-Seeking Network cooperates closely with citizens groups in South Korea and the South Korean government's Truth Commission on Forced Mobilization under Japanese Imperialism. The group maintains an extensive website for its "[Together with Korean Families](#)" project, aimed at resolving the conscript remains issue. The author subscribes to the group's closed email discussion list, which features daily Japanese translations of history-related articles from Korean media sources. The email list frequently includes "on background" postings by central actors in the remains repatriation process describing developments not reported elsewhere. For general background see Utsumi Aiko, Uesugi Satoshi and Fukudome Noriaki. *Ikotsu no Sengo: Chosenjin Kyosei Doin to Nihon (Remains after the War: Forcibly Mobilized Koreans and Japan)*. Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2007 ([Iwanami Booklet No. 707](#)).

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