

Abe's denial of Japan's wartime sex slavery provokes tensions

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Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe provoked a wave of international protests by claiming early last month there was “no evidence” suggesting that Japan’s wartime militarist regime coerced—“in the narrow sense of the word”—the sex slavery of “comfort women” throughout Asia in 1930s and 1940s. While aimed at stirring up right-wing nationalist sentiment at home, Abe’s comments generated opposition from China, South Korea and elsewhere in the region.

The estimated 200,000 “comfort women” were mostly Korean and Chinese, but included other Asian nationals as well as Australians and Dutch. The tragic experience of these women was the product of Japan’s imperialist expansion in which millions of young Japanese were drafted and brutalised in wars of aggression. Rape and murder were initially used as a means of terrorising the subjugated populations. Later the Japanese occupation authorities set up “comfort stations” as a means of keeping Japanese troops under control.

The first military brothels were created in 1932, shortly after Japan’s annexation of the Chinese provinces of Manchuria, but became more widespread after the full-scale invasion of China in 1937. In the 1940s, as the Japanese military occupied much of South East Asia, “comfort stations” were set up across the region. Some of the brothels were run by civilian contractors who lured women with the promise of jobs, but many women were rounded up at gunpoint.

Abe was responding to a US House of Representatives resolution calling on the Japanese government to officially apologise for the wartime abuse of “comfort women” and provide accurate education to the public. Abe’s false argument that the Japanese army was not responsible in the “narrow sense” was followed by other comments by Japanese officials. Foreign Minister Taro Aso criticised the US resolution as being “not based on the facts”.

The non-binding resolution was introduced in January by Mike Honda, a California Democrat of Japanese ancestry, whose main aim was to attract support from American Asian voters. Honda declared the resolution was not to “bash or humiliate” the Japanese government, but sought “to achieve justice for the few remaining women who survived these atrocities, and to shed light on a grave human rights violation, that has remained unknown for so many years”.

Abe was forced to back down somewhat on March 11. He said he would uphold a semi-official statement made in 1993 apologising over the “comfort women” and made a tentative

personal apology during a television program. On March 26, Abe again apologised in parliament “as the prime minister,” but refused to withdraw his earlier statement that the Japanese military was not responsible. In other words, no official apology would be issued.

In fact, Abe was under pressure from right-wing elements within his own party. In February, an investigation was launched by more than 120 Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) legislators led by former education minister Nariaki Nakayama, with the aim of covering up the role of the Japanese military. Nakayama argued that the “comfort women” were professional prostitutes. “Where there’s demand, business crops up ... but to say women were forced by the Japanese military into service is off the mark,” he said, adding: “This issue must be reconsidered, based on truth ... for the sake of Japanese honour.”

Such comments by leading officials and politicians openly whitewashing the crimes of the Japanese military were unthinkable even ten years ago due to mass opposition within Japan to any revival of militarism. That these reactionary ideas can be openly expressed reflects the sharp lurch to the right in Japanese ruling circles during the 1990s.

After the collapse of Soviet Union in 1991, debate opened up in the political establishment over the country’s future position in the world. The end of the Cold War led to great power rivalry over markets, resources and access to cheap labour and increasingly the resort to naked militarism, particularly by the US. With its the post-war pacifist constitution banning sending troops overseas or waging aggressive wars, Japan was at a disadvantage. In lieu of sending soldiers, Tokyo paid billions toward the cost of the first US-led Gulf War in 1990-91.

Initially, the ruling elite sought to exploit Japan’s “pacifist” image as a means of legitimising a more assertive international role, particularly in Asia. To distance Japan from its wartime crimes in the region, the government sought to patch up relations with neighbouring countries by offering limited apologies. As a result, the issue of “comfort women” came to the centre of the ideological debate in Japan.

Just a few days before the LDP fell from power in August 1993, chief cabinet secretary Kono Yohei issued a semi-official statement expressing regret over the treatment 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,” he stated.

Kono, a former LDP president, was well known for wanting closer relations with China. The collapse of the LDP government—for the first time in four decades—was followed by a short-lived, eight-party coalition under Hosokawa Morihiro. He was the first Japanese prime minister to make personal apologies for Japan’s wartime atrocities.

In 1994, the LDP returned to power by forming an unprecedented coalition with the opposition Socialist Party, in which Socialist Party leader Murayama Tomiichi became prime minister. Tomiichi supported the creation of an Asia Womens Fund to collect private donations to provide limited compensation for the surviving “comfort women”. In a speech on the 50th anniversary of the end of World War II in August 1995, Tomiichi came the closest to issuing a formal apology.

Japan’s economic stagnation compounded by market reforms led to rising unemployment, social inequality and growing alienation from the entire political establishment. The Socialist Party’s coalition with the right-wing LDP finished the Socialist Party politically. A series of unstable LDP governments clung to power amid widespread opposition and discontent. Various right-wing LDP politicians attempted to create a base of support by tentatively whipping up nationalist and militarist sentiment.

The coming to power of Junichiro Koizumi in 2001 marked a definite shift, however. Casting himself as a maverick, he unashamedly pursued a program of savage economic restructuring while at the same time resurrecting Japanese militarism. Koizumi made clear that he would make no formal apologies for Japan’s wartime record. In fact, he encouraged the publication of school textbooks whitewashing the crimes of Japanese military and repeatedly visited the notorious Yasukuni shrine to Japan’s war dead.

Koizumi’s more aggressive stance in Northeast Asia, including on Japan’s maritime claims, was bound up with his full support for the Bush administration. He saw the opportunity of exploiting the bogus “war on terror” to throw off the shackles of Japan’s post-war constitution. He provoked widespread opposition by deploying Japanese troops to an active war zone in Iraq for the first time since World War II. However, Koizumi was able to temporarily give the LDP a new lease of life by presenting his policies as anti-establishment.

Abe, a Koizumi loyalist, emerged in this context. In early 2001, as deputy cabinet secretary, Abe reportedly intervened in the making of an NHK television documentary program on “comfort women”. After he met with the channel’s executive director general a few days before the program went on air, the NHK management instructed the producers to significantly weaken their criticisms of the wartime regime. The scandal was exposed four years later, but Abe was not punished. Instead, a number of NHK staff and an *Asahi* newspaper reporter, Honda Masakazu, who exposed Abe’s role, were removed after a barrage of media attacks.

Abe took over from Koizumi last September. Under pressure

from sections of big business, Abe first visited Beijing and Seoul, rather than Washington, in order to improve relations with Japan’s neighbours, which had deteriorated under Koizumi. He deliberately downplayed the controversy over the Yasukuni shrine. In contrast, his comments last month on “comfort women” were noticeably more strident. Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao responded by shortening his current trip to Japan—the first by a Chinese leader in six years.

At the same time, Abe’s government has pushed through two key laws upgrading Japan’s defence agency into a full-fledged ministry—for the first time since the end of the World War II—and reintroducing “patriotic education” in schools. Abe is also preparing to hold a national referendum later this year for a new constitution that will further water down or eliminate the “pacifist clause”. Japan recently signed a security cooperation declaration with Australia to strengthen their role in the US strategic “containment” of China.

These militarist policies are deeply unpopular in Japan. A recent poll by *Asahi Shimbun* showed 75 percent of Japanese regarded the Iraq war a mistake and 69 percent wanted the remaining air force units in Iraq to be withdrawn. In March, after the Abe government agreed to extend the air force mission, 1,500 people protested in Tokyo against the US occupation of Iraq and visiting US Joint Chiefs of Staff Peter Pace. A 40-year-old office worker told Reuters: “I want to do whatever I can to stop the war in Iraq, as well as to stop the Japanese government from changing the constitution to allow troops to be sent abroad.”

The controversy over the “comfort women” reflects the political dilemma facing Tokyo. In seeking to remilitarise to aggressively prosecute its economic and strategic interests, the Japanese ruling elite is compelled to legitimise its past crimes and to whip up right-wing nationalism to create a social base for new ones. By doing so, however, it runs the risk of heightening regional tensions and undermining economic relations with China, as well as provoking broad opposition among working people at home.



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