

# Japanese government seeks to whitewash crimes against “comfort women”

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The Japanese government of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe recently raised the possibility of revising a 1993 statement regarding the military’s wartime abuses against so-called “comfort women”—young women and girls forced into sexual slavery for soldiers in the 1930s and 1940s.

The 1993 statement by then Chief Cabinet Secretary Yohei Kono made a formal but limited apology for the Japanese army’s brutal practice, which constituted a war crime on a large scale. Some 200,000 women and girls, mainly from Korea, but also from China and other countries, were systematically abused.

The Kono statement was based on the testimony of 16 surviving women who gave evidence proving that the military forced them into sexual slavery.

Speaking in late February, Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga indicated that the government intended to review the evidence, while claiming it would respect the fact that the testimonies were given in confidence in closed-door sessions.

Suga’s comments provoked immediate protests from South Korea and China. In response, the Abe government announced that, for the time being, it would not seek to change the Kono statement. Suga has continued to stress, however, that the government intends to review the statements of the 16 comfort women.

Yu Hui-nam, now 84, was 16 when she was forced to work in a military brothel. Speaking to the *Guardian*, she said: “I am furious with Abe. Revising the Kono statement would be shameful and absurd.” Yu continued: “We were snatched, like flowers that have been picked before they bloom. They took everything away from us. When I think back I remember only tremendous pain. We were not living as human beings.”

The Kono statement acknowledged that the Japanese government forced women and girls to act as sex slaves in military brothels at the front lines. It stated: “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.”

It continued: “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.”

The government did not, however, accept that it had a responsibility to compensate the victims for their treatment. An Asian Women’s Fund based on private donations was established, which offered each of the women just ¥2 million (\$US19,500). Many refused the compensation because it did not come directly from the Japanese government. The fund was disbanded in 2007 after compensating only 60 of the 207 women identified by the South Korean government as comfort women.

During his first term as prime minister in 2006–07, Abe commented that there was no evidence that comfort women had been forced into sex slavery. His remarks were in line with the outlook of right-wing Japanese militarists, who whitewash or deny completely all the war crimes carried out by Japanese imperialism during the 1930s and 1940s.

Abe’s current government, which came to power in December 2012, is rapidly seeking to remilitarize. In the course of just over a year, it has boosted the military budget for the first time in a decade, while

moving to abolish legal and constitutional constraints on the armed forces and ratchet up tensions with China over disputed islands in the East China Sea.

Japan's remilitarization goes hand-in-hand with the revival of militarism and the rewriting of history to justify the role of Japanese imperialism before and during World War II. Abe signaled the start of an ideological offensive last December when he visited the infamous Yasukuni Shrine, a symbol of Japanese militarism, where 14 class-A war criminals are interred.

The government has drawn up new teaching guidelines and textbooks that whitewash the history of Japanese imperialism in Asia. In January, the chief of Japan's public broadcaster NHK, Katsuto Momii, appointed by Abe, provoked public outrage when he declared that the abuse of comfort women by the Japanese military was common elsewhere during World War II. "Can we say there were none in Germany or France? It was everywhere in Europe... In the current moral climate, the use of comfort women would be wrong. But it was a reality of those times," he declared.

Another Abe appointee to the NHK board of governors, Naoki Hyatuka, publicly campaigned for former Air Force Chief of Staff Toshio Tamogami in the recent Tokyo election. Tamogami was backed by the ultra-right Japanese Restoration Party and was dismissed in 2008 after writing an essay defending Japanese militarism. Hyatuka took the opportunity during the campaign to flatly deny the 1937 Nanjing Massacre, in which up to 300,000 Chinese civilians and soldiers were brutally murdered.

These attempts to re-write history are aimed above all at Japanese youth, who will be dragooned into fighting in Japan's newest imperialist ventures as conflicts with Japan's neighbors, particularly China, continue to grow. Japan's relations with China have become particularly strained over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea.

As part of its "pivot to Asia," the Obama administration has backed Japan's remilitarization and its aggressive stance toward China, but it has cautiously raised criticism of Abe's revival of militarist traditions. Following Abe's visit to the Yasukuni Shrine, the US State Department declared that Washington was "disappointed that Japan's leadership has taken an action that will exacerbate tensions with Japan's neighbors."

If the United States has any apprehensions over Japan's remilitarization it is principally in regard to South Korea, which Washington has described as a "linchpin" for its policies in the region. Denying that crimes such as sexual slavery took place is an affront to those who still have vivid memories of Japan's brutal colonization of the Korean peninsula.

At the same time, the South Korean elite regularly whips up anti-Japanese sentiment to distract from issues such as rising inequality at home and also from its own falsification of history. Many within the Korean ruling class today enjoy their positions as a result of their families' collaboration with the Japanese government during the colonial period, including President Park Geun-hye herself, whose father, the brutal dictator Park Chung-hee, served as an officer in the Japanese Kwantung Army.



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