

Japanese ministers visit Yasukuni war shrine

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Three Japanese ministers visited the notorious Yasukuni Shrine on Saturday, continuing the push by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's right-wing government to revive militarism and whitewash the war crimes committed by the Japanese army during World War II. Saturday's visit came a day after 110 lawmakers went to the shrine.

The ministers were Sanae Takaichi, the internal affairs and communication minister, Eriko Yamatani, the head of the National Public Safety Commission, and Haruko Arimura, the minister tasked with promoting female empowerment. All three women were added to Abe's cabinet during the shakeup that took place in September.

Abe, who visited the shrine in December 2013, the first sitting prime minister to do so since Junichiro Koizumi in 2006, did not attend Yasukuni last weekend. However, he sent an offering, the third this year—along with one sent in spring and another on August 15, the anniversary of the end of World War II.

The Yasukuni Shrine is a symbol of Japanese militarism, where those who died in Japan's wars, primarily World War II, are symbolically interred, including 14 class A war criminals. An associated museum has military displays and literature that downplay such crimes as the Nanjing massacre, during which the Japanese army murdered an estimated 300,000 captured Chinese soldiers and civilians in 1937.

The Chinese government released a statement, saying: "China would like to reiterate that Sino-Japan relations can only realize healthy and stable development when Japan seriously faces up to and repents of its aggressive past and disassociates itself with militarism." While there are legitimate fears among working people about the re-emergence of Japanese militarism, the Beijing regime exploits those concerns to whip up Chinese nationalism.

Abe has held off going to the shrine this year in part so as not to exacerbate tensions with China. He is reportedly seeking a summit with Chinese President Xi Jinping next month when Beijing will host a meeting of the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation group. Since coming to office in December 2012, Abe has not met the Chinese leader.

Paying homage at the Yasukuni Shrine is just one aspect of Abe's agenda of remilitarisation. His government has increased the military budget, established a National Security Council along the lines of its US counterpart, and "reinterpreted" the constitution to allow for "collective self-defence"—in reality, for Japan to join US wars of aggression.

The three ministers who visited the shrine all have ties to Japan Conference, an ultra-nationalist grouping founded by former elements of the imperial military, Shinto fundamentalists and other conservatives. The group calls for "patriotic values" to be taught in schools, while seeking to cover up the crimes of Japanese imperialism.

In line with this agenda, the government is trying to rewrite the history of the Japanese military's systematic coercion of about 200,000 women from throughout Asia into military-run brothels in the 1930s and 1940s. Many of the women remained silent out of shame before beginning to come forward in the 1980s as light was shone on the extent of this war crime.

Last week, Japanese diplomat Kuni Sato asked Radhika Coomaraswamy, a former special UN rapporteur, to revise her 1996 report detailing the Japanese army's abuse of so-called comfort women. Coomaraswamy rejected the request. Her report detailed the systematic sexual abuse committed by the military and called on Japan to formally apologize and pay compensation to the victims.

In calling for the revision, the Abe government seized on the decision last August by *Asahi Shimbun*,

the leading liberal paper, to retract a series of articles dating back to 1982 on comfort women. The articles were based on the account of Seiji Yoshida, a former Japanese soldier, who wrote about his assignment to round up hundreds of women on Korea's Jeju Island as sex slaves for the army. Before he died in 2000, Yoshida admitted to changing aspects of what happened, but did not withdraw his overall story.

Since the *Asahi Shimbun's* retraction, Coomaraswamy's report has come under attack from the extreme right in Japan. However, she stated that while her report cited Yoshida's story, it was "only one piece of evidence," with much of the report relying on the testimonies of "a large number of comfort women," whom she interviewed.

South Korea's foreign ministry spokesman No Gwang-il criticized the attempt to change the UN report, saying: "Historical truth cannot be concealed even if Japan tries to gloss over the sex slave issue. Only grave criticism from the international community will follow. Seoul will not tolerate Japan's attempt to blur the truth of history."

Japan's right wing has long denied the military's use of "comfort women" or claimed that the women were not coerced. The Abe government is seeking to revise a limited government apology over the Japanese military's abuse of women issued in 1993, known as the Kono Statement. It released a report in June calling into question the testimonies of former Korean comfort women, collected before the statement's release.

Abe's visit to the Yasukuni Shrine last December was the signal for an ideological offensive on a broad front. He appointed a number of known right-wingers to the board of governors of NHK, Japan's public broadcaster. In February, one appointee Naoki Hyakuta bluntly declared that the Nanjing massacre "never happened."

Last Friday, the London-based *Times* reported that NHK banned the use of particular words and references related to the massacre, "comfort women" and the territorial dispute with China over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea. An October 3 document sets out guidelines for writers and translators preparing English-language material. The term "Nanjing Incident" must be used instead of Nanking Massacre. When referring to the comfort women, the words "sex slaves," "brothels," and "forced to" have been banned.

The Abe government's use of the public broadcaster to pursue its militarist agenda was summed up earlier this year by NHK head Katsuto Momii, another Abe appointee. "It would not do for us to say 'left' when the government is saying 'right,'" he said.



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