

Opposition to Japanese government's lies on "comfort women"

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Opposition to Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's attempt to whitewash the history of the Japanese military's war crimes has emerged in Japan and also the United States. Earlier this month, a group of American historians issued a statement criticizing the Abe government's attempts to pressure a US publishing company McGraw-Hill to amend its textbook's treatment of so-called "comfort women."

During the 1930s and 1940s, some 200,000 Korean, Chinese and other women were coerced into sex slavery in "comfort stations" established for Japanese officers and soldiers. Abe and other right-wing nationalists falsely claim that the women were not forced but willingly acted as prostitutes. This revision of history is bound up with the government's plans to remilitarize and to end the current constitutional restrictions on the dispatch of the Japanese military in overseas interventions and wars.

Abe's efforts to rewrite history could cloud plans for him to address a joint session of the US Congress, which, according to the *Japan Times* last weekend, could take place in late April. He would become the first Japanese prime minister to speak to Congress since 1961 when Hayato Ikeda addressed the House of Representatives. Abe's grandfather, Nobusuke Kishi, also spoke before Congress as prime minister in 1957.

A bipartisan group of US lawmakers who visited Japan last week raised questions about Abe's view of history. Democrat Congresswoman Diana DeGette warned that the issues surrounding World War II "could really put some cracks in the relationship... It's really important that Japan not be seen as backtracking... on the comfort women issue and some other issues around the end of the war."

Republican congressman James Sensenbrenner told the *Wall Street Journal* that Abe's "revisionist history"

was hurting "Japan's standing with its neighbors. That has to be cooled down." His warning reflects concerns in Washington that the Abe government's whitewash of Japanese war crimes was undermining relations with South Korea, the other major US ally in North East Asia.

Regardless of these misgivings, Abe's congressional address appears to be going ahead. The Obama administration regards Tokyo as a crucial ally in its "pivot to Asia" and military build-up throughout the Indo-Pacific region against China.

It should be noted that the criticisms of Abe's stance on Japan's atrocities are rather hypocritical. The US political establishment remains silent on its own crimes during World War II, including the indiscriminate slaughter of civilians in the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the firebombing of Tokyo and other Japanese cities.

Within Japan, right-wing nationalist groups continue to wage a vicious campaign against the *Asahi Shimbun* after it retracted a series of articles last August based on the testimony of Seiji Yoshida, a former soldier, who claimed to have forcibly rounded up "comfort women" on Korea's Jeju Island. Yoshida later admitted that he had made up parts of his story, which has been seized on to claim there is no evidence that women were coerced into sex slavery and to demand the retraction of Japan's 1993 Kono statement—a formal, but limited apology over the abuse of "comfort women."

In an interview last month with the Asia-Pacific Journal, Yoshiaki Yoshimi, a leading historian on comfort women, said in, "As early as 1993 at the latest, no one took seriously Yoshida's testimony claiming that he had witnessed the Japanese Army's forcible relocation of women in Jeju Island. The Kono Statement was not based on Yoshida's testimony. Nor

do scholars researching the comfort women issue draw on it for their argument. In short, *Asahi's* retraction of Yoshida's testimony due to its falsity should not affect the discussion."

Other former Japanese soldiers have provided evidence of the military's system of sexual slavery. Masayoshi Matsumoto, currently 92, has spoken out against the crimes he witnessed as an army medic. "I feel like a war criminal. It is painful to speak of such things and I would rather cover it up. It is painful, but I must speak," he said in a 2013 interview with Reuters.

In a more recent interview in the *Asia-Pacific Journal* in October 2014, Matsumoto described working at a base in Yu County in Shanxi Province in China during the war. "Our battalion had approximately one thousand men. We took about 5 or 6 'comfort women' with us. I was a corpsman...I had to help the army doctor to do tests for venereal disease on comfort women."

After describing the instruments and testing methods, Matsumoto said, "These [women] had definitely not arrived there of their own will. Nobody would be willing to travel to such a remote area. The money was handled by Japanese civilians employed by the military, who took care of the women."

Matsumoto made clear that rape of captured village women was rampant and that the setting up of the "comfort stations," where soldiers forced women to have sex, was an attempt to curb the spread of disease among the troops. Matsumoto described finding several women in a captured village.

"When we raided a village, there happened to be some villagers left behind. Normally during a raid all the villagers would flee. Among them were seven or eight women. The soldiers grabbed them and took them away to the barracks. Knowing that they would be killed if they resisted, these women came along without resisting. The women were made to live inside the barracks, and whenever the soldiers felt like it they would visit them to have sex," he said.

Matsumoto explained why he spoke out: "While reading all kind of things, I realized that if we don't face our past squarely, we're bound to repeat the same mistakes. When I look at Abe, I think he's starting to do exactly that. Someone needs to speak up." Asked about Abe's claim that there was no coercion of women, Matsumoto responded: "Such a thing is not

true! It's...nonsense. A lie."

The evidence proving that the Japanese army engaged in the wide-scale and systematic coercion of women into its "comfort stations" is not limited to such personal accounts, but has been found in wartime documents unearthed by historians. Nevertheless Matsumoto's first-hand testimony is not only telling refutation of Abe's lies but also points to the fact that the whitewashing of war crimes is the preparation for new ones.



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