

# South Korean president calls for Japanese apology

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South Korean President Park Geun-hye delivered a speech last Sunday marking a key anniversary in Korea's independence movement from Japan. Park renewed calls for Tokyo, which colonized Korea from 1910 to 1945, to admit to its past war crimes and issue apologies.

Sunday's holiday commemorated the March 1 Movement of 1919, when mass protests erupted throughout the Korean Peninsula against Japanese rule. Two million people took part in demonstrations that lasted for several months. Japan cracked down heavily on the protests, killing 7,000 people and arresting 46,000.

Park criticized Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's Japanese government for its campaign to rewrite history and whitewash the war crimes committed by the Japanese army in the 1930s and 1940s. She called in particular for Abe to apologize for the use of comfort women, a euphemism for sex slaves. During the war, the Japanese military, often with the aid of middlemen, forced or coerced approximately 200,000 women into "comfort stations," where they were required to have sex with soldiers.

However, compared to previous speeches as president on the anniversary, Park seemed to pull her punches, offering a more conciliatory tone toward Tokyo. Pointing to Germany and France as examples, the South Korean leader said both countries "have in the past managed to surmount conflict and enmity and jointly lead the establishment of a new Europe," adding: "I hope Japan will now accept the historical truth in a brave and honest manner and join hands with Korea to write a new history as partners for the 50 years ahead."

Saying Tokyo and Seoul were "important neighbors that are endeavoring together to pursue peace and

prosperity in Northeast Asia," Park highlighted their bilateral trade, which last year surpassed \$86 billion, as well as their cultural exchanges. All these points were left out of previous speeches.

The US government has been applying pressure behind the scenes, pushing Park to find common ground with Japan. According to a February 16 *Wall Street Journal* article, a South Korean diplomat stated that relations between South Korea and Japan were the worst he had seen in 40 years.

Washington has grown frustrated with the discord between its two key allies in northeast Asia. The tensions are cutting across the US "pivot to Asia," which both South Korea and Japan have endorsed. The "pivot" is aimed at surrounding China, both economically and militarily, in order to isolate Beijing and force it to accept the US's global hegemony. Washington views collaboration between Seoul and Tokyo as critical for its war preparations.

Speaking in Washington last Friday, Wendy Sherman, US Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, indirectly chastised Seoul. "Nationalist feelings can still be exploited, and it's not hard for a political leader anywhere to earn cheap applause by vilifying a former enemy," she said. "But such provocations produce paralysis, not progress."

Both major parties, the ruling Saenuri Party and main opposition New Politics Alliance for Democracy (NPAD), criticized Sherman's remarks. "For stability and peace in Northeast Asia, the United States should abandon its vague stance and take a fundamental approach to conflict resolution," the Saenuri Party's Kim Eul-dong said. NPAD lawmaker Jeon Byeong-heon called Sherman's comments "truly deplorable."

Washington played down the remarks. At a March 2 briefing, State Department deputy spokeswoman Marie

Harf said of Sherman's comments: "It does not represent any change in US policy—her remarks in no way reflect a change in US policy—and were not intended to be about any one person or one country."

Neither party truly cares about the victims of Japanese imperialism. Referring to the former comfort women, Park stated in her speech: "The human rights issue of the survivors is an historical task that must be resolved. There is little time left to restore the honor of victims because their average age is reaching 90."

The truth is that South Korean governments regularly exploit the comfort women and other historical issues to whip up anti-Japanese sentiment to distract from declining conditions at home, like rising unemployment and a lack of quality jobs.

Last year, youth unemployment reached a record high, standing at 9 percent, although the real number is likely to be much higher. Statistics Korea last October announced that the "real" total unemployment rate was 10.1 percent. Officially, only 3.5 percent of workers are considered unemployed, but this does not count the under-employed or those who have given up looking for work.

Park's condemnations of Japan also serve to obfuscate the roles of Koreans who willingly served Japanese imperialism. These include Park's own father, the brutal dictator Park Chung-hee, who was in power from 1961 to 1979.

Korean police and other agents assisted the Japanese army to coerce women into the "comfort stations." Others, like the elder Park, who served in Japan's Kwantung Army in Manchuria, at the very least must have been aware of the sex-slave system but did nothing to help these women after World War II.

In the years following the war, Seoul not only turned a blind eye to, but actively encouraged, desperately poor young women to engage in prostitution with US soldiers. In 1962, Park Chung-hee designated red-light areas near US bases as "special tourism districts."

Last June, 122 elderly women sued the South Korean government, saying that when they worked as prostitutes decades ago, police prevented them from leaving. They alleged that the US and South Korean governments regularly inspected the brothels, imprisoning anyone who contracted a sexually transmitted disease. Many of these women still live in poverty today, attempting to survive on government

stipends of \$300 to \$400 a month.



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