

International scholars call on Japanese PM to issue apology

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7 August 2015

A group of 524 historians and other academics last week released a statement critical of the Japanese government of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in Japan and its whitewashing of past war crimes. They included 37 Western scholars, 105 from Japan, and 382 from South Korea. This latest statement follows similar ones earlier this year.

The statement, entitled “2015 Joint Statement by Korean, Japanese and International Scholars for East Asia’s Freedom from the Past,” was released shortly before the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II on August 15. The same day, Abe is scheduled to give a speech to mark the occasion, but is expected to be a step back from past, albeit limited, apologies.

The signers included prominent scholars on modern Korean and Asian history including Bruce Cummings of the University of Chicago, Haruki Wada, professor emeritus at Tokyo University, and Kang Man-gil, professor emeritus at Korea University.

Referring to Abe, the group stated, “His statement must follow in the footsteps of the Kono Statement (1993), the Murayama Statement (1995), the Kan Statement (2010), and other Japanese government history-related statements, not only reaffirming their understanding of history but also taking things one step further. Abe must furthermore admit that Japan’s history of colonization inflicted tremendous pain and damage to neighboring countries, while also expressing sincere regrets and apologies on behalf of Japanese people.”

The Murayama Statement, named after Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama, marked the 50th anniversary of World War II’s end and along with the 2010 Naoto Kan Statement, expressed limited apologies for Japan’s role in World War II. The Kono Statement dealt with the Japanese military’s

widespread abuse of comfort women—or sex slaves.

Appealing for reconciliation, the scholars warned: “Conflicts based on past history can lead to clashing nationalisms, and if territorial disputes and security fears continue to escalate, democracy will retreat. Regression to the past can result in war, which reverses the course of history.”

However, appeals for reason to prevail fall on deaf ears. The falsification of history, along with the eruption of territorial disputes, is being fuelled by the geo-political tensions produced by the deepening economic breakdown of global capitalism.

With Washington’s active support, the Abe government is currently pushing widely unpopular legislation through the Diet that will allow the military to take part in US-led wars abroad. Strengthening its alliance with Japan is part of the broader US “pivot to Asia” directed at undermining Chinese influence throughout the region and encircling it militarily.

As part of its preparation for new wars, the Abe government is whitewashing the wartime atrocities committed by Japanese troops in the 1930s and 1940s. This campaign of denial has involved calling into question the Kono Statement by claiming that so-called comfort women were not coerced into military brothels but were instead willing prostitutes recruited by civilians.

Last Tuesday, a special panel of Japan’s ruling Liberal Democratic Party stated, “If the government finds foreign reports and publications on the comfort women issue groundless, it should actively post counterarguments on websites and newspapers in question.”

In other words, international publications that refer to comfort women as sex slaves should be confronted. Abe’s government earlier this year asked that US

textbook publisher McGraw-Hill change passages on comfort women but was rebuffed.

The panel also argued that the government should challenge the use of the term “sex slaves” on statues set up abroad for the women, including the United States, while seeking to have its proposals included in Abe’s anniversary speech in order to “restore Japan’s honor and trust.”

The coercion and abuse of comfort women is an historical fact. Approximately 200,000 women, including from China, the Philippines, and Korea were made to serve as sex slaves in military brothels. Survivors described hellish conditions, unable to leave, with many others turning to suicide to escape their treatment.

Many of the records pertaining to the military’s use of sex slaves were also destroyed at the end of the war: other cases simply never recorded in the first place. However, historian Yoshiaki Yoshimi uncovered a large number of documents in 1992 in the Defense Agency’s (the predecessor of the Defense Ministry) library, confirming the military’s role in setting up brothels throughout Asia.

In an email to South Korea’s Yonhap news agency, US State Department spokeswoman Katina Adams responded to the LDP panel’s statement by declaring that “the trafficking of women for sexual purposes by the Japanese military during World War II was a terrible, egregious violation of human rights.”

Adams added: “The United States has consistently encouraged Japan to approach this and other issues arising from the past in a manner that is conducive to building stronger relations with its neighbors.” Washington is particularly concerned that tensions between Japan and South Korea have become an obstacle to closer military collaboration directed against China.

South Korea politicians regularly use the issue to whip up anti-Japanese sentiment to distract from domestic issues like youth unemployment. Head of the ruling Saenuri Party, Kim Mu-seong was recently in the United States on an official visit, meeting with several US lawmakers including House of Representative’s minority leader Rep. Nancy Pelosi.

Pelosi reportedly called on Japan to take a more apologetic approach towards the comfort women issue, according to Na Gyeong-won, chairwoman of the

Nation Assembly’s foreign affairs committee, who accompanied Kim.

Kim also met with Rep. Ed Royce, chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee who said, “As a long-time supporter of a strong US-South Korea relationship, I also discussed with Mr. Kim the importance of staying committed to remembering the terrible human rights abuses that occurred during World War II.”

These expressions of concern for human rights are not genuine. Washington’s real concern is to bring South Korea and Japan closer together as part of the US “pivot to Asia.” Despite US pressure, South Korean President Park Geun-hye and Abe have yet to hold an official bilateral summit since the two came to power.

The unresolved friction between two US allies—Japan and South Korea—highlights the dangers that the broader tensions throughout the region can spiral out of control into conflict and war.



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