Korean survivors concerned about Obama's visit to Hiroshima

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As Barack Obama became the first US president to visit Hiroshima last Friday, Korean survivors of the 1945 atomic bombing of the city, who have long felt neglected by Japan, the US and South Korea, raised their concerns about the trip.

Obama offered no apology for the US decision to drop atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki—terrible war crimes that killed an estimated 220,000 people in the immediate explosions. The US did not drop the bombs to speed up the end of World War II, but to send a message to the world, especially the former Soviet Union, that it would not hesitate to use such weapons again to maintain its global hegemony.

While no official investigation has been conducted by South Korea or Japan, an estimated 50,000 Koreans were killed in the Hiroshima and Nagasaki blasts, with an additional 20,000 suffering from the after-effects. There are 2,580 registered Korean survivors still alive today. Many returned to their home country, although others continue to live in Japan.

Many of the Koreans in the two cities had been mobilised as slave labor. Approximately 70 percent of the victims came from Hapcheon County, South Gyeongsang Province. The survivors, as well as their children, suffered the effects of radiation exposure, discrimination and poverty. Little has been done to address their needs as the South Korean government justified the bombings as a necessity and avoided any criticism of the US. The Hapcheon Welfare Center for Atomic Bomb Victims, opened in 1996, is the only group home for survivors in South Korea.

The South Korean government obfuscates the role of US imperialism, then and now. A Foreign Ministry official told Yonhap News Agency on May 11 after the announcement of Obama's plans: "We understand that it was arranged under President Obama's vision for peace and safety through a world free of nuclear weapons." In reality, Obama's refusal to offer an apology is a sign that the US is prepared to use nuclear weapons again in new wars.

Anger among Korean survivors toward Japan, the US and South Korea is still widespread. Many fear that Obama's visit will mark a definitive end to the issue, leaving victims without their demands met and with their needs ignored.

"The (South Korean) National Assembly and government are rotten to the core," said survivor Kim Do-sik, 81, who lives at the group home in Hapcheon. "Tens of thousands of Koreans were either killed when the atomic bomb hit or were beggared and barely returned to Korea alive. But for the past 70 years, the government has neither asked the US and Japan for an apology nor asked for compensation."

Others were concerned that Obama's visit will be used by the right-wing Japanese government of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to continue its campaign to deny Japanese war crimes, such as the Rape of Nanjing and the use of "comfort women"—young women exploited as sex slaves by the Japanese military during World War II.

In a letter to Obama, the Association of Korean Atomic Bomb Victims stated: "We hope that your visit to Hiroshima will not be used to further the Abe government's intention of portraying Japan merely as a victim." Successive Japanese governments have used the American war crimes to justify their own atrocities.

The South Korean government's decision to ignore the survivors ultimately covers up Washington's criminal role in the Pacific War with Japan. The United States was not an innocent bystander, dragged into the conflict by the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. The US

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fought the war to establish its hegemony over the Asia-Pacific region, which included the establishment of the South Korean police-state.

At the same time, the South Korean bourgeoisie regularly exploits the issue of the “comfort women” to whip up anti-Japanese sentiment to distract the public from declining economic conditions and attacks on democratic rights. Japanese war crimes in general are blamed on an evil and foreign force bent on destroying the Korean way of life. In reality, all the crimes during that period, including the dropping of the atomic bombs, were the responsibility of the ruling classes of the two imperialist powers—Japan and the United States.

On the Korean Peninsula, the US and its allies fought a brutal war, destroying the lives of millions, to protect the South Korean dictatorship and maintain its foothold from which to threaten the former Soviet Union and China. The South Korean state continues to play a large role in Washington’s “pivot to Asia,” which is aimed at militarily encircling and preparing for war against China.

South Korea’s refusal to acknowledge Korean atomic bomb victims is also bound up with the role of Korean collaborators in Japan’s colonial rule. They make up a significant portion of the South Korean ruling class and include the father of current President Park Geun-hye, the brutal dictator Park Chung-hee, who controlled South Korea from 1961 to 1979. Park served as a lieutenant in Japan’s Kwantung army, which was tasked with hunting down Korean partisans fighting the Japanese.

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