

Japan & WWII: Will Abe review of Japan's official stance on the forced recruitment of Asian and European women and girls into wartime army brothels?

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Abe risks much with sex slave issue — Revisiting '93 apology would spark anger worldwide

Among the components that make up the conservative agenda advocated by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, one stands out for its potential to inflame international relations: a review of Japan's official stance on the forced recruitment of Asian and European women and girls into wartime army brothels.

Abe, who returned as prime minister in late December, has long called for a reassessment of the 1993 government statement acknowledging the issue and apologizing over it.

Any replacement for the so-called Kono statement would not only stir up tensions with China and present-day South Korea, where bitter memories of Japanese atrocities still linger, but also draw furor from Japan's closest ally, the United States, and other Western nations, a former ranking Foreign Ministry official warned.

Kazuhiko Togo, who once headed the ministry's European and Oceanic Affairs Bureau, said how to treat the wartime sex slaves – known euphemistically as “comfort women” in Japan – is the “biggest foreign policy issue between Japan and South Korea right now.”

Citing the August 2011 ruling by South Korea's Constitutional Court that it was unconstitutional for its government to make no specific effort to resolve Japan's refusal to directly compensate the victims, Togo said in a recent interview that South Korean President-elect Park Geun Hye would have no choice but to take measures in response.

Also, “should Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's administration go ahead to (replace) the Kono statement, Japan-U.S. relations will also take a hard hit,” said Togo, who is now director of the Institute for World Affairs at Kyoto Sangyo University.

Abe has pushed for a review of the 1993 statement by then-Chief Cabinet Secretary Yohei Kono that acknowledged the Japanese military's responsibility in the forced recruitment of females into sexual servitude, and which offered an apology to the victims.

Soon after Abe's new government was launched in late December, Beijing and Seoul were bemused when his chief Cabinet secretary – the nation's top spokesman – Yoshihide Suga said it is “desirable for experts and historians to study” the Kono statement while leaving it unclear whether the Abe administration upholds it.

This immediately drew harsh criticism from all fronts, including The New York Times in an editorial in early January.

While some in Japan tend to put the focus of the argument on whether the women and girls were “forced” into sexual slavery, Togo argues that from the outside world’s viewpoint this point is irrelevant.

“For my American friends and others, even if (Japan) gathered the women through cajoling, in other words lying about the nature of the job, that already is completely out of the question,” Togo said.

“The world opinion toward sexual violence is extremely severe. Most people would imagine what it would be like if their own daughters were put under the same circumstances.”

In addition, the argument that what happened was inevitable given the social circumstances of the time is also considered unacceptable, Togo said.

“It is equivalent to saying in the United States today that slavery was unavoidable,” he explained. “(Saying so), you will come under heavy fire.”

“While there are various history-related issues such as the Yasukuni (Shrine) and the Nanjing Massacre, I feel that the degree of disgust Westerners feel toward the comfort women issue is at a completely different level over that toward the other issues.”

The government takes the view that war compensation had already been settled under various postwar peace treaties. Instead, the privately financed Asian Women’s Fund was set up in 1995 to pay atonement money, but many of the surviving women have rejected it and continue to demand official compensation from the Tokyo government.

Togo said that while he doesn’t believe it was a mistake when Japan decided in the past not to pay atonement money out of state coffers, the only effective solution at present would be for the government to pay compensation.

“The South Korean society’s response at the time – ostracizing women who accepted the (fund’s) atonement money from Japan – was merciless, but for as long as the reality is that the issue remains unresolved, the only way would be for the (Japanese) government to offer compensation,” Togo said. “And then, confirm with the South Korean government that this is the end of the issue.”

He also noted that although the Japanese Supreme Court in 2007 denied individuals’ claims to war reparations from the government through legal proceedings, the court also said that morally, such a right is not substantively nullified. “Compensation from the national budget can be politically accounted for,” Togo reasons.

The retired diplomat is also critical of the overseas lobbying attempts by some Japanese lawmakers and intellectuals, such as placing an advocacy ad in The Washington Post in 2007 – during Abe’s first stint as prime minister – saying that no historical documents have been found showing that females were forced into prostitution by the Imperial Japanese Army.

“Politically, the 2007 advertisement was a complete failure,” said Togo, who was living in California at the time. “While feeling firsthand the formidable nature of U.S. public opinion, I took the firm stand that Prime Minister Abe is humble on the comfort women issue.”

“Yet, as a result of the ad, that same year the U.S. Congress passed for the first time a resolution demanding an apology (from Japan) to the victims in the comfort women issue,” he said.

More recently, a group of Liberal Democratic Party lawmakers visited the city of Palisades Park, New Jersey, last year requesting that a monument dedicated to the comfort women be removed from a public park there.

Togo said the actions in New Jersey backfired and “rattled the nerves” of President Barack Obama’s administration, including then-Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton.

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http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2013/02/15/national/abe-risks-much-with-sex-slave-issue/#.UR2ob_IbIjE
