

USA/Japan: Hashimoto in unprecedented crisis – ‘Comfort women’ outrage in U.S. also warning to Abe?

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OSAKA — The list of those in and out of Japan, but especially in the United States, who scorn and deride Osaka Mayor and Nippon Ishin no Kai (Japan Restoration Party) coleader Toru Hashimoto for his justification for the wartime “comfort women” is growing daily, presenting a unprecedented crisis for the once-popular politician.

Hashimoto’s remarks that the sexual slavery system had been necessary during the war and that U.S. service members in Okinawa should spend more time at paid sex establishments to prevent indecent assaults against local women are being decried by increasing numbers of Americans.

However, those in the U.S. who follow bilateral relations – as well as Hashimoto’s supporters – say he is only a convenient whipping boy and the real source of American wrath is actually Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and his Cabinet.

Since May 13, when Hashimoto uttered his remarks, the U.S. State and Defense departments, congressional representatives, the city of San Francisco, and a former U.S. ambassador to Japan have all issued statements of condemnation.

In the U.S. Congress, Democratic Rep. Mike Honda, who led a 2007 congressional resolution that criticized Japan, and, indirectly, then-Prime Minister Abe, over its stance on the comfort women and called for a formal apology, said Hashimoto’s comments were “repulsive.”

“His view is an affront to history, humanity, and most of all to the young women who were coerced into horrific psychological, physical, emotional and sexual violence, including gang rape, forced abortion, humiliation and mutilation,” Honda said last week.

But American concern over Japan’s politicians discussing the comfort women issue predates Hashimoto’s remarks.

Former U.S. Ambassador to Japan Thomas Schieffer told an audience in Washington before Hashimoto made his remarks that he was concerned about suggestions from the Abe government that it wanted to revisit the 1993 Kono Statement. That declaration said the Japanese military was, directly or indirectly, involved in the establishment and management of brothels across Asia for its troops and the transfer of comfort women to work in them.

“There is no constituency in the U.S. for a position that says, “boys will be boys.” To revisit the Kono Statement would, in my judgment, do great harm to Japan’s interests in the U.S. and throughout the rest of Asia,” Schieffer said in reference to remarks Abe made in recent months suggesting he didn’t quite agree with the 1993 direct apology to the sex slaves issued by then-Chief Cabinet Secretary Yohei Kono.

Mindy Kotler, director of the Washington-based Asia Policy Point and one of those involved in the

drafting of a 2007 congressional comfort women resolution, said the reaction in Washington was more one of embarrassment at Hashimoto's comments than alarm.

"Yes, criticism of Hashimoto is a comfortable way to criticize Abe. But Japan-watchers in Washington take the same position as their Liberal Democratic Party friends," she said, referring to Abe's ruling party. "Hashimoto is an outsider, literally. He is not someone who can be taken seriously." However, they are all concerned that Abe is getting a bit more strident than they would like. They, along with the State and Defense departments, have been sending messages that Abe should tone it down and also not go to (war-linked) Yasukuni Shrine," Kotler added.

As to Hashimoto's comments regarding sex establishments and U.S. forces in Okinawa, what he did was to open a Pandora's Box on a matter that had long been taboo among those in Tokyo and Washington who deal with the security alliance: that of prostitution and sexual violence in communities near U.S. military bases.

But combined with his comfort women comments, Hashimoto's Okinawa remarks in many quarters were interpreted, legitimately or not, as advocating a modern-day comfort women system in the prefecture.

"What U.S. servicemen did and do on Okinawa is no surprise and there is no shock value in bringing it up. However, there is a difference between free enterprise prostitution and state-organized sex slavery," Kotler said.

Eric Johnston, *Japan Times* Staff Writer, May 25, 2013

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<http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2013/05/25/national/hashimoto-in-unprecedented-crisis/#.UaL2ktiz640>