

Interview

Japan: Abe chided for querying war apology

Monday 8 July 2013, by [Associated Press](#) (Date first published: 24 June 2013).

TOKYO (AP) — A retired Japanese politician whose name is on a landmark 1993 apology over Japan's use of wartime sex slaves says Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's attempts to downplay Japan's actions before and during World War II have hurt the country's global image and could undermine its pacifist pledge.

Yohei Kono played a major role in the early 1990s helping Japan confront its wartime past and establish warmer ties with its Asian neighbors during years leading up to the 50th anniversary of the end of World War II.

He said in a rare interview with The Associated Press this week that Abe's suggestion that he wanted to revise two apologies — including a 1995 statement expressing regret for Japan's wartime aggression and commitment to peace — risks setting back by decades relations with China and South Korea.

If the apologies are changed, "Japan will be isolated from the international community. That much is clear," the 76-year-old Kono said. "I'm afraid he (Abe) is underestimating a possible impact of his comments" on Japan's diplomacy.

Abe has alarmed China and South Korea by suggesting that he would like to revise Japan's pacifist constitution so that Japan's military can operate with more freedom. Kono, too, is concerned about this push and says Abe's government needs to fully accept that Japan is geopolitically part of Asia, and has no choice but to deepen ties with China and South Korea.

"You say it's hard to get along with them, or there is complicated history. Even so, we must overcome the difficulty and be friends. It's crucial to keep that in mind and make efforts, and prioritize that before anything," said Kono, who retired four years ago after 42 years at the top of Japan's political world.

As Chief Cabinet Secretary in the early 1990s, Kono was a relatively liberal-leaning politician within the generally conservative Liberal Democratic Party. He helped craft — and read to the public on Aug. 4, 1993 — what has come to be called the "Kono Statement" apologizing for "immeasurable pain and incurable physical and psychological wounds" inflicted on thousands of "comfort women," mostly Korean but also from China, the Philippines, Indonesia and the Netherlands.

The statement — the government's most thorough apology on the matter — won praise in Asia and elsewhere outside Japan, but faced some criticism at home from conservatives, including members of Kono's former party, which has become increasingly right-wing.

An earlier statement by his predecessor Koichi Kato in 1992 acknowledged a limited government role in the brothel operation and recruitment of the women, but was not considered a full apology and prompted South Korea to demand more. That led to a further investigation by Japan and a fuller apology in the Kono statement that acknowledged coercion used on many of the women — the part that most upsets opponents of the apology.

Abe is one of them. He has questioned parts of the apology that says many of the women were coerced into providing sex for Japanese soldiers, saying there is no official record to prove that. He has suggested that he would like it revised, but after recent criticism now says he accepts it.

He has said his Cabinet does not necessarily support all of the 1995 apology by then-Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama, Japan's main expression of remorse for its wartime and colonial past and pledge to peace and elimination of "self-righteous nationalism."

Abe has also upset China and South Korea by repeatedly saying that there is no clear definition of "aggression." He has campaigned for a "departure from post-war regime," which virtually means a revision of the education and social values introduced by the 1945-1952 U.S. occupation era.

That comes along with other nationalistic actions by his government, including the April visit by several government ministers and nearly 170 lawmakers to Tokyo's Yasukuni war shrine, which memorializes 2.3 million war dead, including 14 leaders convicted of war crimes.

Kono also deplored comments last month by Osaka's outspoken mayor, Toru Hashimoto, who said that using women as sex slaves during the war was considered "necessary" to instill discipline and provide relief for battle-weary soldiers.

"Those nationalistic comments sound vigorous in Japan but they are not acceptable outside the country. Absolutely not," Kono said.

"That dealt considerable damage to Japan's national interest," he said. "You must ask yourself if you can say those things to the international society.... Would you say that to people in Beijing or Seoul?"

Historians say up to 200,000 women from across Asia were forced to provide sex for Japanese soldiers. Some of the surviving women, particularly Korean victims, have demanded an apology approved by parliament and official compensation from the government. Tokyo has resisted, saying war reparations with South Korea were dealt with in treaties restoring relations after the war. In 1995, Tokyo created a fund using private donations as a way for Japan to pay former sex slaves without providing official compensation.

In Japan, public sentiment has become less compassionate in recent years toward Asian victims of the country's wartime aggression. References to "comfort women" once in school history textbooks have disappeared.

Japan's soul-searching has lost steam after the 50th anniversary of the end of war, just as liberal-leaning to centrist factions in the ruling party started to weaken because of corruption scandals and infighting, allowing Abe's rightwing group to dominate.

A United Nations torture committee recently urged Japanese top government officials to stop their whitewashing attempts and do more to educate the public about the issue, but the Abe government rejected the recommendation.

Much of the sex slavery debate still focuses on what role the government played in organizing brothels, and if — or to what extent — the women were coerced. The Kono statement says the military was involved directly or indirectly in the establishment and management of front-line brothels and transfer of women, and that many women were "recruited against their own will through coaxing and coercion."

Nobuo Ishihara, who was deputy Cabinet secretary and assisted Kono in the government of then-Prime Minister Kiichi Miyazawa said interviews with 16 South Korean women in Seoul led to the

conclusion that there was coercion though there were no official documents showing so. The women interviewed by Japanese diplomats in the run-up to the 1993 Kono apology were selected because they were not connected to anti-Japan lobbyist groups.

“There was no doubt there were women who were forced to become comfort women against their will,” Ishihara said in a separate recent interview with the AP.

He said there has been strong criticism for their charges of coercion without official documents specifically stating government orders to so.

“We chose to face our negative legacy of the wartime past and bring a closure to it, and start forward looking relations with South Korea, and this policy has continued since. It’s the promise we made, like a diplomatic treaty,” he said. “It should remain unchanged even if the governments change.”

Associated Press, June 24, 2013

P.S.

* <http://mainichi.jp/english/english/newsselect/news/20130629p2g00m0dm052000c.html>