

South Korea: Court orders Japanese firm to pay Korean women over forced labor

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GWANGJU, South Korea (Kyodo) — A South Korean court on Friday ruled in favor of four Korean women who were forcibly conscripted as laborers during Japan's colonial rule of the Korean Peninsula, ordering Mitsubishi Heavy Industries Ltd. to pay them 150 million won (about \$141,510) each in compensation.

The Gwangju District Court, which issued the ruling, also ordered the same company to pay 80 million won to a fifth plaintiff whose two deceased family members, both of them women, were forcibly conscripted into labor for the Japanese.

The amount of compensation ordered for the four living victims of forced labor was a record high.

Friday's ruling marked the third of its kind after South Korean courts in July ordered Mitsubishi Heavy and Nippon Steel & Sumitomo Metal Corp. to compensate Korean men who were taken into forced labor.

On July 10, the Seoul High Court ruled in favor of four plaintiffs, ordering Nippon Steel & Sumitomo Metal to pay a total of 400 million won. The Busan High Court on July 30 ordered Mitsubishi Heavy to pay the same amount in compensation to five South Koreans.

In a landmark decision in May 2012 that reversed previous lower court decisions, the South Korean Supreme Court ruled that the right of former forced workers and their families to seek withheld wages and compensation was not invalidated by a 1965 treaty that normalized bilateral ties. The Japanese government maintains that all individual compensation claims were settled with that treaty.

That involved a group of South Koreans, including 82-year-old Yang Gum Dok, who had earlier sued Mitsubishi Heavy and the Japanese government in Japan for being forced to work from 1944 when they were 13 to 15. The Japanese Supreme Court threw out their case in 2008.

The issue could escalate into a major diplomatic spat at a time when bilateral relations remain strained over territorial disputes and differing perceptions of wartime history.

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