

Former East Timor 'comfort women' now speaking out

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Keiji Hirano, Tokyo — Human right groups in Japan and East Timor have launched a campaign to donate history teaching materials to the newly independent nation that focus on the struggles of women who were forced to provide sex to Japanese soldiers during World War II.

Based on interviews with 15 former "comfort women" and others in East Timor, the groups have set up 50 panels bearing their pictures and testimonies for an exhibition at the Women's Active Museum on War and Peace in Tokyo through May 27.

Under the ongoing campaign, they plan to translate the explanations on the panels into the official East Timorese language, Tetun, so people there will be able to learn about wartime history.

"People in East Timor do not have enough materials to learn their own history," said Akihisa Matsuno, a member of the East Timor Japan Coalition. "We hope we can raise 2 million yen in order to complete the translation and creation of the panels by the summer."

They plan to show the panels to junior and senior high school teachers in East Timor at seminars for use in their history classes, according to Matsuno, also professor at Osaka University of Foreign Studies.

As part of their efforts to promote the campaign, the Japanese groups recently invited Angelina de Araujo from East Timor, a member of the HAK Association, or the association for human rights and justice, so she could talk to people in Japan about her interviews with the former sex slaves.

"I did not know anything about the wartime sex slavery before the interviews, and I felt sad, as a woman, about what they told me," Araujo, 27, said. "Sometimes I was unwilling to listen to

their stories, but I continued the interviews as I believed their history would be terminated if we did not record them."

According to the study by Araujo and other researchers, the Japanese military established wartime brothels all over East Timor after invading the region in 1942, and intimidated the local people into providing young women for the soldiers.

Some interviewees testified that they had been repeatedly raped by the soldiers, even though they had not yet started menstruating, while one woman said that young girls were afraid of condoms as they did not know what they were and felt afraid to have something unknown entering their bodies.

Another woman said she had been kept at the house of a high-ranking officer. "My parents sometimes brought me food, but they never entered the house," she said. "They just stood at the door and stared at me while I was inside the house."

Araujo, who held talk sessions in five Japanese cities, including Sendai, Tokyo and Osaka, said, "Some of them were initially hesitant to speak out as they felt embarrassed with their past hardships, while some started crying while telling me their stories." "But now they have allowed us to display the panels on their testimonies," she said. "Now that I have come to know their tough lives, I expect the Japanese government to compensate them." The interviews also covered 85 other people who went through the era of Japanese occupation and were aware of the damage caused by the Japanese military.

A former village chief said he had been ordered to find and offer young girls, while another man testified he had made the "comfort women" — called "sweet girls" in the local language — bathe every day to ensure that they would not become dirty.

"The women were unpaid, and they were given neither food nor clothes, so their parents brought them food," he said. "As for me, I was ordered at the end of every day to clean up the women's rooms, in which condoms were scattered over the floor."

Kiyoko Furusawa, another member of the East Timor Japan Coalition, said, "Many high-ranking Japanese government officials have visited East Timor so far, but none of them has apologized for Japan's wartime acts or referred to compensation."

Furusawa, also associate professor at Tokyo Woman's Christian University, called on the government to acknowledge the wartime history of East Timor sincerely.

East Timor officially gained independence in 2002 after two-and-a-half years under UN administration following a vote for independence from Indonesia in 1999.

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