

## **New York Times: In New Jersey, Memorial for 'Comfort Women' Deepens Old Animosity**

Link: <https://nyti.ms/KyPoCd>

In New Jersey, Memorial for 'Comfort Women' Deepens Old Animosity

By KIRK SEMPLE  
MAY. 18, 2012

Two delegations of Japanese officials visited Palisades Park, N.J., this month with a request that took local administrators by surprise: The Japanese wanted a small monument removed from a public park.

The monument, a brass plaque on a block of stone, was dedicated in 2010 to the memory of so-called comfort women, tens of thousands of women and girls, many Korean, who were forced into sexual slavery by Japanese soldiers during World War II.

But the Japanese lobbying to remove the monument seems to have backfired — and deepened animosity between Japan and South Korea over the issue of comfort women, a longstanding irritant in their relations.

The authorities in Palisades Park, a borough across the Hudson River from Manhattan, rejected the demand, and now the Japanese effort is prompting Korean groups in the New York region and across the country to plan more such monuments.

“They’re helping us, actually,” said Chejin Park, a lawyer at the Korean American Voters’ Council, a civic group that championed the memorial in Palisades Park, where more than half of the population of about 20,000 is of Korean descent, according to the Census Bureau. “We can increase the awareness of this issue.”

Korean groups have been further motivated by a letter-writing campaign in Japan in opposition to a proposal by Peter Koo, a New York councilman and Chinese immigrant, to rename a street in Flushing, Queens, in honor of comfort women.

Mr. Park said that in the past week or so, his organization had received calls from at least five Korean community organizers around the country — in Georgia, Michigan, New Jersey and Texas — expressing interest in building their own memorials. These would be in addition to at least four memorials in the works in California and Georgia, he added.

The monument in Palisades Park is the only one in the United States dedicated to comfort women, borough officials said.

“Starting from Flushing, N.Y., we will continue the construction in the areas of major Korean-American communities,” said Paul Park, executive director of the Korean-American Association of Greater New York, one of the oldest Korean community organizations in the region. “We Korean-Americans observe the issue on the level of a global violation of human rights.”

Tensions between Japan and South Korea over the legacy of comfort women were reignited in December when a bronze statue in honor of victims was installed across the street from the Japanese Embassy in Seoul, the South Korean capital. Japanese officials have asked the Korean authorities to remove that statue.

Japanese leaders have said that their formal apologies, expressions of remorse and admissions of responsibility regarding the treatment of comfort women are sufficient, including an offer to set up a \$1 billion fund for victims. But many Koreans contend that those actions are inadequate. Surviving victims have rejected the fund because it would be financed by private money. The victims are seeking government reparations.

Mayor James Rotundo of Palisades Park said the lobbying began obliquely late last month. Officials at the Japanese consulate in New York sent e-mails requesting a meeting with borough administrators.

“I called the secretary and said, ‘What is this about?’ ” the mayor recalled in an interview, “and she said, ‘It’s about Japanese-U.S. relations,’ and I said: ‘Oh. Well, O.K.’ ”

The first meeting, on May 1, began pleasantly enough, he said. The delegation was led by the consul general, Shigeyuki Hiroki, who talked about his career, including his work in Afghanistan — “niceties,” Mr. Rotundo said.

Then the conversation took a sudden turn, Mr. Rotundo said. The consul general pulled out two documents and read them aloud.

One was a copy of a 1993 statement from Yohei Kono, then the chief cabinet secretary, in which the Japanese government acknowledged the involvement of military authorities in the coercion and suffering of comfort women.

The other was a 2001 letter to surviving comfort women from Junichiro Koizumi, then the prime minister, apologizing for their treatment.

Mr. Hiroki then said the Japanese authorities “wanted our memorial removed,” Mr. Rotundo recalled.

The consul general also said the Japanese government was willing to plant cherry trees in the borough, donate books to the public library “and do some things to show that we’re united in this world and not divided,” Mr. Rotundo said. But the offer was contingent on the memorial’s removal. “I couldn’t believe my ears,” said Jason Kim, deputy mayor of Palisades Park and a Korean-American, who was at the meeting. “My blood shot up like crazy.”

Borough officials rejected the request, and the delegation left.

The second delegation arrived on May 6 and was led by four members of the Japanese Parliament. Their approach was less diplomatic, Mr. Rotundo said. The politicians, members of the opposition Liberal Democratic Party, tried, in asking that the monument be removed, to convince the Palisades Park authorities that comfort women had never been forcibly conscripted as sex slaves.

“They said the comfort women were a lie, that they were set up by an outside agency, that they were women who were paid to come and take care of the troops,” the mayor related. “I said, ‘We’re not going to take it down, but thanks for coming.’ ”

The Japanese consulate in New York has been reluctant to discuss its lobbying.

In interviews this week, Fumio Iwai, the deputy consul general, would not say whether the consul general had requested that the monument be removed. But he denied that the consul general had offered to help the borough in return for the monument’s removal.

Mr. Hiroki “did not offer any such condition,” he said.

Mr. Iwai said the issue of comfort women, if not Palisades Park specifically, was the subject of continuing discussions “at a very high level” between the governments of South Korea and Japan.

“So,” he said, pausing as if to choose his words carefully, “things are quite complicated.”