

NPR News: Atlanta Debates How To Recognize History of 'Comfort Women'

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A task force hoping to commemorate the exploitation of a group known as “comfort women” is looking for a new home for their planned memorial in Atlanta. That’s after the National Center for Civil and Human Rights pulled out of an agreement to erect the memorial outside its building.

Comfort women is a common way to refer to victims of a Japanese military policy of sexual enslavement in the World War II era. Historians estimate the Japanese army coerced up to 200,000 people, mostly Korean women, into working in military brothels from the 1930s until the end of the war.

The struggle over acknowledging and memorializing this history has caused internal [political tensions](#) in Japan between the Japanese and South Korean governments, affected the drafting of [American textbooks](#) and recently reached the U.S. Supreme Court. Now that fight appears to be sparking in downtown Atlanta.

The Atlanta Comfort Women Memorial Task Force, a group of community leaders and advocates that includes both Korean- and Japanese-American members, said it had worked with the center for six months and had a signed agreement to install the memorial outside the center.

“We got their board approval in December. We worked to finalize the site selection and then signed on the dotted line in early February,” said Helen Kim Ho, a consultant and advisor to the task force.

The planned monument was to be a statue of a seated Korean girl alongside the steps leading up around the center.

“We have this gift of having a Center for Civil and Human Rights,” Ho said. “The whole museum, everything about its purpose and mission is aligned with our purpose.” But last month, the Japanese Consulate General learned of the plans. It then got involved to oppose the statue.

“The Government of Japan is seriously concerned that the statue in Atlanta may cause discrimination, humiliation or bullying against members of the Japanese community in Atlanta who wish to live in peace,” Deputy Consul General Yasukata Fukahori said in an emailed statement.

The Japanese military’s comfort women policies are part of a category of history that a certain group of Japanese would like to forget, according to Alexis Dudden, a history professor at the University of Connecticut who specializes in modern Japan and Korea.

“This recent move in Atlanta is just the latest manifestation of a much broader effort that’s been going on really since 2012,” Dudden said. That’s when the current prime minister of Japan, Abe Shinzo, returned to power.

In 1993, the Japanese government officially took responsibility for, and agreed to stop denying the history of the comfort women. Abe led an effort to overturn that official statement in 2012. “[Abe’s] support base has a very deep strain, not simply of denialism, but an effort to whitewash the history of 20th-century Japan such that it didn’t do anything bad in its empire,” Dudden said.

According to Dudden, in addition to first-hand testimonies, there is solid documented evidence of the details of the Japanese comfort women system: “Things such as orders for the transportation of the victims across borders on Japanese government ships, the records of [brothel] ticket systems, the actual structures in some parts of Asia in which the women were actually held.”

In Atlanta, the complications of the struggle Japan and other Asian countries faced in framing the history of WWII-era atrocities are perhaps not as familiar as the city’s fabled civil rights history.

“I’ll just say it. We were facing a wall of ignorance. That’s the best way I’d put it,” said Ho.

The Metro Atlanta Chamber admitted its unfamiliarity with the history and subsequent controversy when it was drawn into weighing in on the planned memorial by inquiries from the media.

“Like many in our community, we’ve recently been learning more about this topic. It has become clear many have strong, but sometimes varying views on the best ways to acknowledge and memorialize this part of history,” chamber spokesperson Deisha Barnett said in a statement. Into that vacuum of historical knowledge came both the Japanese Consulate’s opposition as well as unofficial pressure in the form of a strongly worded email sent by a Tokyo based man named Ken Kato. In it he casts doubt on the accepted history of comfort women.

He confirmed to WABE that he sent these emails to business donors of the Center for Civil and Human Rights, as well as to Invest Atlanta. A spokesperson for Home Depot confirmed it had received Kato’s letter.

Kato’s email, sent with the subject line “Vicious Defamation Campaign against Japanese,” makes the case that details of the history of comfort women are in dispute, and that efforts to memorialize these women are South Korean propaganda. He points to what he believes is evidence that comfort women were “well-paid” prostitutes, some of who even fell in love with and married their clients.

Ho said that the task force has no affiliation with the South Korean government.

Japan’s influence in Atlanta’s business market makes Kato’s efforts in his campaign to stop the memorial’s construction worth noting. Japan is the sixth-largest export market for Georgia in 2015, according to the state’s Department of Economic Development. More than 500 Japanese businesses, employing nearly 30,000 people, operate here.

Korean car maker Kia has a large and well-known manufacturing plant in West Point, Georgia, and South Korea is the ninth-largest export market for Georgia.

For Ho, the Center for Civil and Human Rights' rejection of the planned memorial flies in the face of Atlanta's reputation as "the city too busy to hate."

During the civil rights era, "while Birmingham and Arkansas were in the news for hosing and all this violence, we avoided that, and one of the big reasons was that business leaders refused to let that happen to our city," Ho said.

In a letter to the memorial task force, the Center for Civil and Human Rights cited an outdoor design policy as its reason for pulling out of the agreement. The center's CEO, Derrick Kayongo, said neither the content of the memorial, nor pressure from the Japanese Consulate had anything to do with its decision.

"The symbol itself, while very, very important, ran into the difficulty of how many other symbols are we going to have at the center, and what's the process of doing that," Kayongo said. He said the center remains open to comfort women-related programming, which Ho, for the moment, rejects.

"[The center] made a colossal mistake. And [its] inability to actually live out [its] mission and vision is on display. I hate that. It kills me. I love this center," Ho said. She said her group is continuing to search for their memorial.

More than 50 other cities around the world, including about a dozen in the U.S., have comfort women memorials. Scholars estimate fewer than 40 victims are still alive today. This month the Japanese government filed an amicus brief before the U.S. Supreme Court in a lawsuit involving a similar dispute about a memorial in Glendale, California.

**Editor's note: The memorial found home in the Blackburn Park in nearby city, Brookhaven, Atlanta in June 2017.