

## Open letter to the City of Berlin regarding its decision to remove the Statue of Peace

Authors: Comfort Women Action for Redress and Education

**OVERVIEW:** On Monday, September 28, 2020 (local time), Berlin citizens welcomed the Girl Statue symbolizing the hundreds of thousands of women and girls from a dozen countries who were sexually enslaved by Imperial Japan before and during WWII.

This statue has been installed in the Mitte District that is centrally located in Berlin with an approval from the local government. A German civic group Korea Verband led these efforts to work with the local government. The statue was received warmly by the German citizens who appreciate the importance of remembering the past crime against humanity to avoid repeating the same mistake.

On Wednesday, October 7, the Mitte District government ordered Korean Verband to remove the statue by October 14, admittedly under the heavy lobbies from the Japanese government that portrayed the statue honoring the victims of the sexual slavery by its military as discriminatory against Japan and the Japanese citizens, and the issue merely as a Japan-Korea dispute.

Supporters around the globe expressed strong concern for the Japanese government's ongoing attempt to revise and whitewash the "comfort women" history, and to erase this memory from the global citizen's mind. Following letter is just one example of the supports provided to the citizens and the supporters of the Statue of Peace in Berlin.

On December 3, 2020, the District government adopted a decision to allow the statue to stay for the original duration of display (1 year). This decision was met by "regret" and renewed resolution by the Japanese government that Japan's chief cabinet secretary, Katsunobu Kato, said Tokyo will "continue to request the prompt removal of the statue."

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Last Monday, the Berlin Statue of Peace or "Friedensstatue" was installed in Moabit in the Mitte borough of Berlin. Dressed in traditional Korean clothing, she represents the first Korean survivors to come forward in the 1990s about their rapes by Japanese imperial forces during World War II. The Japanese military referred to them as "comfort women," but they were actually victims of an unprecedented sex slavery and human trafficking system created by the Japanese Empire.

The "comfort women" were not the only targets of the Japanese military's sexual violence. In the build-up to and during World War II, wherever Japanese troops landed in the Asia Pacific, they razed through women and girls, including German women on the island of Java, British

nurses trapped at St. Stephen's College in Hong Kong, Australian nurses gunned down on Bangka Island, and Dutch civilians rounded up into rape camps across Indonesia. The Japanese military's indiscriminate violence skirted German Nazi entrepreneur John Rabe, who intervened against rapes by Japanese soldiers in Nanking, but swept up German nuns and priests thrown overboard by Japanese naval officers on the destroyer ship Akikaze.

Sixteen of the Korean "comfort women" survivors are alive today. Fifty years after the end of World War II, they broke the silence and continue to demand that the Japanese government take legal responsibility for its policy of military rape throughout the entire Asia Pacific. Their testimonies caused hundreds of women – from China, the Philippines, Indonesia, East Timor, Taiwan, Malaysia, and the Netherlands – to disclose their own ordeals of mass rape, infanticide, and forced abortion, hysterectomies, and sterilization at the hands of Japanese military officers, soldiers, and doctors.

As a result, a number of Japanese historians, journalists, and activists have dedicated themselves to uncovering the full scope of the atrocities, both abroad and in Japan, which currently ranks 66th in the World Press Freedom Index. They, along with human rights experts, formed the Women's International War Crimes Tribunal in 2000. This historic people's tribunal enabled the survivors to bear witness in the face of the Japanese government's ongoing prevarications, and was based on prosecutions for mass sexual crimes in Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia, which led to establishing the International Criminal Court.

Yet the Japanese government continues to whitewash the historical truth of "comfort women" as a "political" dispute that involves only itself and South Korea. "Comfort women" have disappeared from Japanese textbooks under legislation spearheaded by former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. Japan's position regarding "comfort women" has been widely criticized in the international community, including in resolutions passed by the European Parliament and the U.S. House of Representatives in 2007, which our organization supported.

In 2013, our organization gifted a "comfort women" memorial to our local government in the City of Glendale, California. The Japanese government supported a lawsuit to tear it down, using similar tactics that they are deploying in Berlin, but they lost at the regional and appellate levels. In 2017, the U.S. Supreme Court refused to hear the case, thus preserving the statue. Today, we continue to raise awareness of the history through educational efforts, despite repeated attacks from the Japanese government through its local consulate.

The Japanese government now brings their dark campaign of historical denialism and revisionism to the streets of Berlin. Nine days after the Friedensstatue was unveiled as a temporary public art installation, Mitte's District Mayor, Stephan von Dassel, has abruptly rescinded the permit, following coercive statements made by Japan's Foreign Minister Toshimitsu Motegi and Chief Cabinet Secretary Katsunobu Kato at the behest of new Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga, who is aping Shinzo Abe's hardline stance.

The District Mayor seems to have taken the Japanese government's side, echoing its claim that the statue's meaning is limited to a bilateral dispute. In doing so, he ignores the thousands of victims from all of the Asian and European countries – including Germany – whose women and children were shorn down by Japan's wartime sexual violence, and the link between "comfort women" and accountability for conflict-related sexual violence today.

In America, we learn the history of the Holocaust and the names of Anne Frank and Sadako Sasaki – the innocent victims of cultural genocide and nuclear destruction during World War II. But the world knows little about the “comfort women,” who were also young women, teenagers, and girls, treated as second-class citizens wherever Japan was the occupying or colonizing force.

Monuments like the Statue of Peace are not meant to be convenient. They cause us to reflect upon our collective responsibility when human and women’s rights continue to be violated around the globe. And when powerful nations like Japan evade responsibility for war crimes by throwing subterfuge and money at the problem, the entire framework of human rights norms and international relations is undermined.

As German Chancellor Angela Merkel stated during her visit to Japan in 2015, “clearing up the past is the prerequisite for achieving reconciliation between perpetrators and victims.” Particularly in Germany — a country known for confronting its wartime history amidst a rising tide of extremism that includes Holocaust denialism — removing the Statue of Peace sets an alarming precedent. It conflicts with the multi-cultural fabric of Berlin, whose residents include the memory-keepers and refugees of past world wars, civil strife, and ongoing conflict.

A survivors’ monument like the Statue of Peace often becomes a litmus test about who will stand tall when women and children are violated. We urge you to reverse course and take action to protect this statue as a symbol of your support for transnational human and women’s rights.

Comfort Women Action for Redress and Education (CARE)