

Justice for “Comfort Women” – Introduction to the global movement

Author: Comfort Women Action for Redress and Education

No one knows exactly how many women and young girls and boys were victimized as sex slaves by the Imperial Japanese military during the Pacific War and WWII, but the estimate ranges from as few as 50,000 to as many as half a million. Vast majority of these victims did not survive the war. The small number of survivors who were able to return home and those who remained in the faraway foreign land in which they were abandoned lived in the silence, quietly dealing with the trauma of physical and psychological wounds.

With the growth of women’s movement in the 1980s, sex tourism became a significant social issue in Korea and Japan that led to the interest in the “comfort women” survivors who were still living in silence throughout Asian countries.

In 1990, the Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan was formed; and in 1991, a survivor Hak-sun Kim came forward to publicly testify about her ordeal as a sex slave for the first time. Encouraged by Hak-sun Kim’s courageous testimony, numerous survivors who were living in silence in Korea and other countries began to come out and identified themselves as the victims.

In Korea, a demonstration in front of the Japanese Embassy began on January 8, 1992, in response to the Japanese Prime Minister Kiichi Miyazawa’s visit to South Korea. This demonstration, the Wednesday Demonstration, continued every Wednesday in front of the Japanese Embassy in Seoul, with the surviving Grandmas and their supporters, rain or shine, marking it as the longest continuous demonstration recorded at the Guinness Book of the Record. It is still continuing to this day.

The survivors and the supporting civil organizations came together in solidarity to form the Asian Solidarity Conference, a biannual gatherings held in Seoul, Tokyo, Manila, Taipei where the survivors and advocates from South Korea, North Korea, Japan, China, Taiwan, Indonesia, the Philippines, East Timor and more got together to discuss strategy to realize justice for the victims. At the same time, multiple lawsuits against the Japanese government were raised by the survivors.

The seven demands to the Japanese government were adopted at the Asian Solidarity Conference as follows:

1. Admit the “comfort station” system was a sexual slavery and a war crime committed by the Japanese government
2. Thoroughly investigate and disclose the documents relating to the “comfort station” system
3. Offer an official apology
4. Pay government reparations
5. Punish those responsible for the “comfort station” system
6. Include the “comfort station” system in textbook and educate the Japanese public about it
7. Build memorials and museums

Japanese journalists and scholars did a lion's share of exposing evidence of the deep involvement of the Japanese government and the military in every aspect of the "comfort" system, which led to the Japanese government's first acknowledgement in its role in the "comfort" system. In 1993, then Chief Cabinet Secretary of Japan, Yohei Kono, announced a statement – Kono Statement – that acknowledged partial involvement and responsibility of the Japanese military in the "comfort" system and expressed sincere apology and remorse, and promised to teach this history to Japan's youth forever.

The international community, including UN, responded to the courageous testimonies of the survivors and declared rape during wartime was declared to be a crime against humanity. In 2000, judges and lawyers of international law came together in Japan to hold the Women's International War Crimes Tribunal in Tokyo where the Emperor Hirohito was indicted and found guilty for the "comfort" system during WWII.

However, the Japanese government took a wrong turn towards history revisionism, abandoning the promise in the Kono Statement to forever engrave this painful history in the memory of the Japanese people and teach it to not forget. By 2000, the mention of the "comfort women" disappeared from all Japanese middle school textbooks. In the early 2000s, the movement seemed to have reached a dead-end when all lawsuits raised by the survivors against the Japanese government failed at the Japan's Supreme Court.

The new momentum was created in 2007 when the US Congress unanimously passed the House Resolution 121, led by a Japanese American Congressman Mike Honda, urging the Japanese government to formally acknowledge the responsibility of and unequivocally apologize for the "comfort women" atrocity, and to educate Japanese public so that the same crime will never recur. Numerous other countries and Japanese local governments also passed similar resolutions. Memorials honoring the victims began to go up in the US local city sites, as well as some private properties.

The Japanese government, led by the Prime Minister Shinzo Abe who was in his second term, engaged in heavy anti-lobby activities to block and stymie all efforts to remember and educate the "comfort women" issue in the United States, dubbing its efforts a "History War." In 2014, the history deniers filed a federal lawsuit against the City of Glendale to remove the city's newly erected memorial – the Statue of Peace. Glendale fought the lawsuit which went all the way up to the US Supreme Court and prevailed. In 2017, then Osaka's mayor severed the sister-city relationship with San Francisco, to protest the city's designation of the newly built "comfort women" memorial as the city's property. In the similar vein, the Japanese government is continuing its - mostly failed - efforts to stop the "comfort women" memorials and education around the world, often utilizing its embassies and consul general's offices, with more than 500 million-dollar annual PR budget (See Yamaguchi's article).

Ironically, the more ardent the history denialism plays out, the more controversy it creates, yielding more opportunities to educate the local public. That is what happened in Palisades Park, New Jersey, Glendale, California, San Francisco, California and in the textbook controversy involving McGraw-Hill where the Japanese diplomats demanded a passage about the "comfort women" be deleted from one of its textbooks.

At the eleventh hour of their arduous life, the survivors' wishes remain the same – to witness the acknowledgement of the wrongdoing by the perpetrator government and to receive a sincere,

direct, and unequivocal apology for it. Apology or not, our duty to remember and educate this dark chapter of human history remains.