'If we don't face our past, we're bound to repeat the same mistakes.' Japanese wartime medical orderly reports on army's role in maintaining 'comfort women' system

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David McNeill introduction, Matsumoto Masayoshi testimony (Japanese and English transcript and video of testimony), translation by Miguel Quintana

For years, Abe Shinzo, Japan’s prime minister, has been playing with diplomatic fire over a sordid episode of wartime history that has been at the center of a storm of controversy involving Japan, China, Korea and other outposts of Japan’s empire: the herding of thousands of women across Asia into Japanese military brothels. His decision this year to order an investigation into a landmark government apology to the so-called “comfort women” might have helped end the controversy. Instead, it has further ignited it, which may indeed have been Abe’s intention – he has campaigned for nearly two decades to undermine the apology.

The 1993 Kono statement, compiled in consultation with South Korea by Japan’s then chief cabinet secretary Kono Yohei, acknowledged the army’s role in forcing the women into sexual slavery. Nationalists, championed by the Yomiuri, Japan’s most popular newspaper, deny coercion and insist the women voluntarily provided “comfort” to frontline troops. They have repeatedly demanded the withdrawal of the so-called Kono statement, with potentially explosive diplomatic consequences.

In June, a government panel set up by Abe said the facts used to draft the statement were accurate and there are no plans to change it. But the panel’s report also revealed that the statement was the product of months of secret negotiations with South Korean diplomats. The diplomatic record reveals intense discussion on the level of “coerciveness” used to recruit the women, with Japan implying that some may have gone to brothels voluntarily. Predictably, perhaps, revisionists say that proves the statement was a political fudge, not an admission of official responsibility.

The campaign to rewrite the Kono statement has been given an added push by the decision of the Asahi newspaper in August to retract a series of articles it carried on the comfort women. The articles, written in the 1980s and ‘90s, some of which used a now discredited witness called Yoshida Seiji, were not true, said the newspaper. The editors had been “unable to see through” Yoshida’s “fraudulent testimony” they admitted ruefully.

The humbling of Japan’s liberal flagship has triggered a tsunami of abuse. The Yomiuri said the Asahi’s coverage had helped fuel anti-Japan sentiment in South Korea, and became a basis of “misperception of Japan” throughout the world. Abe told the Sankei newspaper, which has led a two-decade campaign against the Kono Statement that “many people had suffered” because of the Asahi’s reporting. Emboldened, ultra-nationalists have threatened to firebomb universities that employ ex-Asahi
journals.

A boycott campaign, led by the Sankei, has taken a toll. Asahi’s circulation is down by 770,000 since November 2013. A national “anti-Asahi Shimbun” committee, led by lawmaker Nakayama Nariaki, is seeking to press the advantage. Its inaugural conference in Tokyo this month (Oct. 25th) will discuss plans to widen the boycott and haul Asahi editors and journalists before the Diet. The committee’s ultimate aim is clear: pressure the government to rewrite the Kono statement and in the words of cabinet minister Inada Tomomi, “restore Japan’s honor.”

Neonationalists such as Inada have ignored a string of well-documented reports making it clear that the Asahi’s coverage of Yoshida had relatively little impact on the surge of interest in the comfort women issue in Japan and internationally, and in no way detracts from the extensive documentation of military and government involvement in the comfort women system. Many of those involved in the 2007 US House of Representatives Comfort Women resolution 121, for instance, including Dennis Halpin, a former senior Asia policy staffer, said in September that: “There was ample documentary and testimonial evidence from across the Indo-Pacific region to support the fact that Imperial Japan organized and managed a system of sexual slavery for its military...” The Yoshida memoir and Asahi’s reporting of it were “not factors” in drafting the resolution, they added.

Nevertheless, several members of Abe’s cabinet are gearing up for a demand that the statement be withdrawn next year, the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II - and the 50th anniversary of the normalization of relations with South Korea, an action, if successful, that is certain to poison Japan’s relations with South Korea, China and other Asian countries.

Abe, as a parliamentarian, long supported nationalist think tanks that reject Japan’s “apology diplomacy” for its wartime misdeeds. During his first term as prime minister in 2007, he got himself into hot water by saying there was “no proof” the comfort women were coerced by the military. But in March, 2014 he bowed to pressure by pledging not to revise the Kono statement.

Ironically, the statement was intended to end the controversy and reset the diplomatic compass. Instead, the dispute has festered and spread to the US, where a string of memorials to the comfort women, erected by Korean communities, has triggered Japanese diplomatic protests.

One way out of the impasse might be to shift the probe to the perpetrators. Matsumoto Masayoshi, a former medical orderly with the Japanese army, has spoken out this year about what he saw. Matsumoto, 92, says Korean women were used like public toilets, with soldiers lining up to rape them. He has offered to tell what happened to anyone who will listen. It might come as no surprise to learn that nobody from Abe’s government has bothered to turn up and hear his story.

Matsumoto full video: Japanese testimony with English translation by Miguel Quintana

00:00 まあ、私たちの部隊に、大隊に、一個大隊に千人ぐらいいるんですけど、5人か6人の慰安婦さんたちを連れて行っているんですね。

Our battalion had approximately one thousand men.

We took about 5 or 6 “comfort women” with us.

00:14 そこで私は衛生兵でしたから、…衛生兵っていうのは分かりますね。

I was a corpsman... do you understand that word?
00:31 I had to help the army doctor to do tests for
venereal disease on comfort women.

00:37 I learned the testing methods, how to handle
the equipment and all that.

00:45 Obviously we didn’t have microscopes, so we
did simple visual checks.

00:49 There’s this instrument you put in the vagina.
It pops open like this and allows you to see
inside.

01:07 We just visually checked if the inside didn’t
look funny.

01:15 There’s a place called Yu County in (Shanxi)
China. It was a large city surrounded by
ramparts. That’s where our battalion had its
headquarters.

01:28 Apart from that, companies one and two were
stationed further away, but there weren’t any
comfort women there. You could only find them
at battalion headquarters.

01:37 Attached to the headquarters were one
company and the command section. That was
about 300 soldiers.

01:47 The rest of the battalion was spread over towns
and villages 20 to 30 kilometers further away.
They - how can I put it - ruled over that entire
area.

02:04 The men in the company attached to the
battalion HQ may have been able to visit the
brothels from time to time, but they were
primarily meant for the officers and the NCOs.

02:15 These [women] had definitely not arrived there
of their own will. Nobody would be willing to
travel to such a remote area.

02:23 The money was handled by Japanese civilians
employed by the military, who took care of the
women.
ちとセックスをして、そしてもう兵隊たちの中
に性病が蔓延して、兵隊が全部使いものになら
なくなった。

The reason why the comfort women system was
set up is that our soldiers were having sex with
the Chinese. Diseases started spreading and
that would have made the army completely
useless.

02:57
それですね、これじゃいかん、という
事で、日本
の慰安婦制度というのを作
って連れて行くようにしたんです

This situation was unacceptable, and that’s why
they created the comfort women system and
had those women accompany us.

03:05 部落の急襲をした時、ま、普通は部落を
急襲したら、部落内はもう逃げていないんです
けれども、逃げ遅れた人たちがいて、

When we raided a village, there happened to be
some villagers left behind. Normally during a
raid all the villagers would flee.

03:14 そしてその人たちの中に婦人たちがい
て、7人、8人ぐらいね、

03:14 Among them were seven or eight
women.

03:21 兵隊たちがみな捕まえて、部落の兵舎に連
れて帰ったんです。ですから、その人たちは、
抵抗すると殺されますから、もう抵抗しないで
付いて来るんです。

The soldiers grabbed them and took them away
to the barracks. Knowing that they would be
killed if they resisted, these women came along
without resisting.

03:34 その人たちを、兵舎の一部のところに住
まわせて、そして兵隊たちが勝手に行っては、
性交すると。

The women were made to live inside the
barracks, and whenever the soldiers felt like it
they would visit them to have sex.

03:50 それで衛生兵の仕事は、その人たちの性
病検査をすること。

So my job as a corpsman was to monitor these
people for venereal diseases.

03:58 そして医務室には山ほどコンドームがあ
りましたからね、それを兵隊たちに配って、注意
しろよ、と言って兵隊に配るというのが、私の
仕事です。衛生兵のしごとです。

The infirmary had a pile of condoms. I
distributed them to the soldiers and urged
them to be careful. That was my job as a
corpsman

04:11 （婦人たちの）反応はね、もう、抵抗し
たら殺されること分ってますから、もう従順で
す。ただもう何も言わなくて、ただ言われる
ままにしてるんですよ。

The women understood that they would be
killed if they resisted, so they were docile. They
didn’t say anything; they just did as they were
told.

04:26 隊長が、隊長が1週間ぐらいしてから、
「もうよかろう、帰そうじゃないか」と言って、
帰したり。

After about one week, our commander said
“that’s enough, let them go.” And he released
those women, telling them to go home.

04:39 その代わりにね、村長にね、村長に言っ
て、「婦人を出せ」と。

But in exchange, he asked the head of the
village to give us other women.

04:49 それは、ですから、2人来ましたけどね婦
人は、その2人の婦人たちは、まあ、そうしたこ
とを仕事にしている人たちだったと思います。

And so two women came to us. I think these
two were actually professionals.

05:00 でその人たちの性病検査も私の仕事です。
And again, I was in charge of checking them for VD.

05:05 それはもう戦争終わるまでずっと、帰って来るまで。帰って来るときはもう、ほったらかしですからね。

That was my job all the way up to the end of the war, until we returned to Japan. When we left, these women were abandoned on the spot.

05:15 強姦はしっちゅうあるんです、兵隊たちは。もう女を見つけたら強姦するんです。

Rape was rampant among soldiers. As soon as they found a woman, they would rape her.

05:23 色んなことを、いろんなものを読んでると、やっぱりね、過去をちゃんと見てないものは、また同じことを始める。

While reading all kind of things, I realized that if we don’t face our past squarely, we’re bound to repeat the same mistakes.

05:31 そうするとね、今の安倍さんなんか見ていると、ほーそうじゃな、また同じこと始めたら、こちらやっぱり言わないかんと。

When I look at (Prime Minister) Abe, I think he’s starting to do exactly that. Someone needs to speak up.

05:39 これはやっぱりね、自分は、生きている以上は、証言するのが私の（使命）。…92まで見てるんですよ。

And I feel that for as long as I’m alive, I should bear witness to what I saw, having made it to the age of 92.

05:48 あと4、5年もしたら戦争の体験者はいなくなる、と。僕の存在は今、貴重な存在だ、と。

In another 4 to 5 years those who experienced the war will all have died. I think my existence, right now, is precious.

だからやっぱり、言い続ければ、言い続けることが僕の使命だと思って、言っています。

That’s why I speak out. Continuing to speak out is my mission, and that’s what I’m doing.

06:07

Jump to the following...

14:47

Q: 安倍さんは強制はないといってるでしょう?

Mr. Abe is insisting there was no coercion involved in the abduction of the women.

14:52

そんなことないですよ！ そ～んなこと・・・

Such a thing is not true! It’s.....

14:58

Q ばかばかしい?

Nonsense?

15:00

ばかばかしい。うそを言うな、っていうんだ。

Nonsense. A lie.


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