

Japan May Admit Army's WWII 'Sex Slavery'

July 27 93
By T. R. Reid
Washington Post Foreign Service

TOKYO, July 26—After decades of denial, Japan's government reportedly is moving toward full acknowledgment of the Imperial Army's role in forcing tens of thousands of captive Asian women to serve as sex slaves for Japanese soldiers during World War II.

A team of investigators from the prime minister's office went to Seoul today to begin taking testimony from women who were forced to serve as so-called "comfort women" at Japanese military bases right up to Japan's surrender in 1945.

Press reports here say the hearing is to gather information for a study to be issued by the prime minister's office next month. In it, the reports said, Tokyo is preparing to admit for the first time that the Japanese army forced women from Japan's prewar colonies—including Malaysians, Filipinos, Indonesians, and Dutch women captured in Indonesia—to be prostitutes for Japanese troops.

After refusing to discuss this harsh aspect of World War II history for decades, the Japanese government has conceded in recent years that as many as 200,000 women were enslaved as prostitutes. Prime Minister Kiichi Miyazawa last year formally apologized to South Korea for the action.

But to date, Tokyo has not conceded that the women were forced to serve by Japan's military.

The government's position is not completely

clear, but seems to be that the "comfort women" were actually employed by private Japanese businesses that then sold their services to soldiers. Last year, Miyazawa said the military was "involved," but he did not say the army had forced the women to serve. This distinction has been cited in Japan as a reason why the government need not pay blanket compensation to the surviving women.

But now, Japan reportedly is ready to take the next step and agree that the military, which ruled the nation and its Asian colonies with dictatorial force during the war years, forced the women to serve against their will.

The women themselves have been saying as much for years. In today's opening session in Seoul, for example, according to news media reports here, one survivor told the Japanese officials that "when any woman tried to run away, the army would torture her with red-hot iron stakes."

South Korea's newly elected president, Kim Young Sam, has said his government does not want any compensation from Japan for the women, as long as Tokyo provides a complete acknowledgment of the program and an apology.

But a number of the Korean "comfort women" have sued for redress in Japanese courts. The problem is, Japanese civil suits take so long that the elderly women could die before a verdict comes down. Others are seeking direct compensation from Japan's government.

The Japanese have insisted for two decades that

no reparations are due individual Korean victims of the war because the two countries agreed on government-to-government reparations in 1965. The report expected next month, however, may take up the question of whether such compensation should be paid and how much.

Japan's government has not said why it is undertaking a new study now of this perennial source of tension between the Japanese and their southeast Asian neighbors. But there is a growing sense here that this nation has not yet fully compensated the victims of the war it brought upon the region 50 years ago.

Tsutomu Hata, leader of the newly formed Shinseito political party and a strong prospect to be the next prime minister, declared repeatedly during the recent election campaign that Japan must make a "genuine" apology to its World War II victims. Press reports here say one reason for the hearings in Seoul is that Miyazawa wants to take action on the "comfort women" issue before he leaves office next month.

There is dispute about how many women were forced to serve as sex slaves, and what countries they came from. But it is generally agreed that the largest number, perhaps as many as 100,000, came from the Korean Peninsula.

Because their forced sexual activities made the women "unclean" in traditional Korean terms, large numbers of them were too ashamed to marry, or to return to their families after the war.