

NATIONAL

'COMFORT WOMEN' REDRESS FIASCO

Victims still want an official state apology

By TOMOKO OTAKE

Staff writer

The nation's attempt to offer relief to former foreign "comfort women" through a government-initiated project has turned into a quagmire.

Established in July 1995 with the backing of the government, the nominally private Asian Women's Fund aimed to give financial assistance to women forced into sexual servitude for Imperial Japanese troops before and during World War II.

But the fund's goal of distributing ¥2 million in individual "atonement money" — raised from the private sector through donations — to some 300 surviving former sex slaves in South Korea, the Philippines and Taiwan has ignited protests from some of the women and their supporters, who see the fund as a government attempt to dodge its legal responsibilities.

Historians estimate up to 200,000 women from areas in Asia under Japanese control, as well as from Japan, were taken to frontline brothels.

Based on a government survey released in August 1993, Yohei Kono, then chief Cabinet secretary, came out to state that in many cases, the women were coerced or deceived into servitude.

He also claimed military authorities were directly involved in "the recruitment" of the women in some cases.

Out of "moral responsibility" over the issue, the government helped set up the fund in July 1995. The fund's cam-

History of 'comfort women' fund

July 1995: The fund opens its office in Tokyo's Minato Ward.

July 1996: The fund is set up to provide a ¥2 million individual lump-sum payment to some 300 former "comfort women" in the Philippines, South Korea and Taiwan, as well as to offer government-funded medical and welfare assistance worth ¥700 million over a 10-year period.

August 1996: Four Philippine women become the first to receive the atonement money and then Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto's letter of apology.

January 1997: The first payments in South Korea are made to seven women, igniting calls from both the women's supporters and the Seoul government to suspend the project.

March 1997: The fund signs an agreement with the Indonesian government to build 50 housing facilities for the elderly over 10 years.

May 1997: The fund starts soliciting applications for aid from Taiwanese victims by publicizing aid-application procedures in local dailies.

May 1998: South Korea makes a lump sum payment to about 130 women in exchange for a pledge not to receive the Japanese money.

June 1998: The fund project is halted in South Korea.

July 1998: Officials of the fund sign an agreement with a Dutch group to offer welfare and medical support to Dutch women who were forced into sexual slavery in the former Dutch East Indies.

paginers and staffers included leading scholars in international law, history and political science as well as those who have long worked to raise public awareness of the issue.

But because the government has not budged from its long-standing position that postwar reparation treaties settled all legal claims by foreign war victims, evaluations of the measure have been mixed.

Although more than 70 women, many from the Phil-

ippines, have received both the atonement money and government-paid medical and welfare assistance from the fund, many more remain opposed to the project. They instead demand individual state compensation and an unequivocal apology from the government.

The fund kicked off in South Korea in January 1997 with redress payments to seven South Korean women without the endorsement from local groups supporting them.

Claiming the need to protect the recipients' privacy and to shelter them from being blamed for receiving the aid, since last September, managers of the fund have not provided an area-by-area breakdown of the recipients, although they pledged to eventually disclose the numbers. This has also angered groups pushing for state redress for the women.

"Everything should be open," said Yun Chung Ok, corepresentative of the Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan.

"If it's nothing to be ashamed of, why don't they (fund officials) do everything openly?"

The uproar over the fund peaked in June, when the fund was forced to withhold its operations in South Korea.

The Seoul government unofficially told fund officials that although it was not rejecting the project per se, it wants the distribution of the lump-sum payment to be halted and instead such alternatives as war memorials or monuments to be provided.

Satoru Sato, director of regional policy at the Foreign Ministry's Asian Affairs Bureau, said Seoul has been expressing displeasure with the fund since the first payments were made in the country in January 1997.

The definitive blow came in May, when the Seoul government paid 35.6 million won (about ¥3.5 million) to some 130 victims in the country on

condition that they not receive redress from the fund. It excluded the seven who had already received the atonement money.

Seoul maintains it has covered the financial needs of the women and the fund should be used for other efforts, such as getting to the bottom of the sexual slavery system and passing on the truth to future generations.

In recent months, some Japanese media have even urged canceling the fund, saying it will have no raison d'être if its atonement projects are not accepted by the nations where its target recipients live.

But officials of the fund argue it has a valid reason to exist. Thus the atonement efforts were carried out in South Korea and Taiwan, despite local opposition, because the victims are aging and there is no time to waste, they say.

Although "the fund is not perfect," it is the best move Japan has come up with so far, and just rejecting it takes the victims nowhere, a source close to the fund said.

"Thirty-four women have died in South Korea (since Seoul identified 186 former sex slaves there)," he said. "What has the campaign to demand state redress achieved in the meantime?"

Momoyo Ise, executive director of the fund, claimed the fund's position is that the money provided by the South Korean government is financial support for the women,

while the money from Japan amounts to a public expression of atonement for the victims' suffering.

"We have maintained that the two differ in nature and therefore can coexist," Ise said. "We appreciate the South Korean government's stance that it will take care of its people, but we want to ask (Seoul) not to discriminate against the seven women who received the fund first."

It is not certain whether the fund can be reinstated in South Korea.

Fund officials have discussed alternatives in the event the money cannot be paid, but no conclusions were reached. Many involved with the fund oppose the idea of building war memorials or monuments, arguing that the fund should serve to help those still living.

Government officials are also reluctant to get involved with the idea of memorials due to the continuous controversies across Japan over such projects, including what their contents should be or how to display them.

The fund would also be at a loss over how to handle the nearly ¥500 million it has raised were the atonement payments stopped.

"We can't return the money to contributors," the source close to the fund said. "Some of the money was sent by anonymous donors, and other money was raised on the streets with no names asked."

NATIONAL

ESCALATION SPARKED BY TEXTBOOK CHANGE

Many voices join 'comfort woman' battle

by HIROSHI YAMAGIWA

staff writer

Nationwide debate over comfort women" will probably not end soon. Did wartime Japanese authorities really abduct Korean women for sex slavery, and is it the key question? Should school textbooks cover the issue and should Japan alone be mentioned regarding such practices?

Historical revisionists first gained momentum after last summer when it was reported that junior high school textbooks would mention the comfort women for the first time. The antirevisionist camp, which claims Japan was in the wrong, became more active after this. Venues for the debate include the media, Internet and symposiums.

The primary players are scholars and intellectuals. But many others have joined the fray, which has led to a lawsuit regarding the textbook revision, local-level assembly members taking action against the books, the formation of antirevisionist groups and an editorial cross fire between major newspapers.

Results of this year's textbook screening by the Education Ministry, to be released next month, may further fuel the debate, depending on the approved contents regarding comfort women, the euphemism for women mostly from Japanese-occupied parts of Asia who were forced to provide sex for Japanese soldiers during the war.

Both sides of the debate agree there were such women at "comfort facilities," but they sharply disagree on whether it was prostitution or slavery and whether Japanese authorities were responsible for the plight of these women.

Some people, including University of Tokyo Professor



YUMI ONO GRAPHIC

Nobukatsu Fujioka, claim Korean agents were responsible for making deals with the women's parents or deceiving the women while recruiting.

He also claims such business practices were common in those days, and it is wrong to apply today's social values to such activities.

Others, including Chuo University Professor Yoshiaki Yoshimi, claim Japan violated international law because its army established and controlled comfort facilities. No matter how the women were recruited, forcing them, including minors, into sexual slavery must be condemned, according to Yoshimi.

Japanese-language World Wide Web sites discussing the issue include Yoshirin Watch at <http://www.wink.co.jp/~yosirinwatch/kaigisitu.html>.

This Japan-was-not-wrong site has its mutually acknowledged counterpart in the Japan-was-wrong-camp, which is called Jugun Ianfu Mondai Johoshitsu, or Information

Room on Military Comfort Women <http://www.saesparam.com/jugun/>.

Yoshirin Watch was created by supporters of Yoshinori Kobayashi, a charismatic cartoonist and founding member of the Group to Make New History Textbooks, which since December has been demanding that the Education Ministry delete textbook descriptions of the comfort women.

Kobayashi has made arguments similar to Fujioka's in his cartoons in the biweekly magazine Sapio. In the past, he focused on contentious issues like the cult Aum Shinrikyo and the HIV infection of hemophiliacs through contaminated blood products.

It seems the antirevisionists can no longer ignore Kobayashi's influence on the public, especially young people.

Chuo University's Yoshimi, who has discovered government documents proving the army's involvement in con-

trolling comfort facilities, contributed to a recent issue of Sapio a three-page rebuttal to Kobayashi's cartoon.

Although Yoshimi admitted he cannot confirm that Japanese authorities abducted Korean women, he said Kobayashi "can't see the forest for the trees" by focusing on Korean agents who worked under the Japanese army during the time when the Korean Peninsula was a Japanese colony.

Kobayashi has urged Yoshimi to correct what he terms is the wrong image prevailing in South Korea: that the women were taken away by Japanese.

Two major newspapers, each with a circulation of several million, recently clashed on the issue.

On March 31, the daily Asahi Shimbun, which is considered liberal, used its front page, an editorial and two other full pages to summarize past findings, concluding that the Imperial Japanese Army was "deeply involved" in sex slavery.

The feature included an interview with former Chief Cabinet Secretary Yohei Kono, who stated in 1993 that comfort women from the Korean Peninsula were recruited, transferred and controlled "generally against their will."

The Sankei Shimbun, a conservative national daily, immediately responded in its own editorial, saying the Asahi effectively admitted errors in its reports that the Japanese army conducted "slave hunting" to find comfort women.

The Sankei also said testimony by 16 former comfort women, which led to the 1993 Kono statement, were not backed up by evidence.

On April 3, 350 parents and children from across Japan filed a suit with the Tokyo

District Court in a bid to prevent the children from being obliged to use what the plaintiffs called "biased" history textbooks, referring to comfort women and other issues.

On May 1, the Japan Federation of Bar Associations asked local assemblies nationwide not to adopt appeals to demand the references be deleted from school textbooks.

Some assemblies already adopted such appeals, though they do not immediately affect the central government.

The Education Ministry plans to announce in late June newly approved high school textbooks for next spring.

Textbooks are screened every four years and last year's process dealt with junior high school textbooks. Many of the new textbooks will reportedly have more detailed descriptions of comfort women than before, including testimony from the victims.

Tokyo University's Fujioka said discussing high school textbooks is more difficult than junior high school textbooks because high school education is not compulsory. But he did not rule out the possibility that the screening results will further fuel the debate.

"Of course textbooks must not carry anything false, and we have to check the information," he said.

But Nobuyoshi Takashima, a professor at the University of the Ryukyus who recently debated with Fujioka in the May 24 issue of the weekly magazine Shukan Gendai, is optimistic from an antirevisionist stand point.

"Current high school textbooks already mention comfort women," leaving no room to protest anew, Takashima said. "Besides, Mr. Fujioka has admitted in Shukan Gendai that textbooks aren't everything in class."