

**00-04-17 CHINA: FEATURE-CHINESE "COMFORT WOMEN" DEMAND JUSTICE.**

By Nailene Chou Wiest

SHANGHAI, April 17 (Reuters) - Wan Aihua, a defiant glint in her eyes, pulled up her undershirt to reveal multiple scars along her midriff to the audience at a rare Chinese conference on "Comfort Women".

"I am the living proof of the atrocities of the Japanese army," said the wiry 71-year-old. "And look at this," she added, turning her head to the side to reveal a grotesquely torn ear-lobe.

A reporter had challenged her to show proof she had been forced into sex slavery by the invading Japanese army before and during World War Two.

Wan's scars were revealed at the first conference of its kind in China, bearing testimony to the atrocities that occurred and highlighting a drive by comfort women to obtain an apology and compensation from Japan.

Born in Inner Mongolia in 1929, Wan was sold by her opium-smoking father to a family in the northern province of Shanxi before the Japanese invasion in 1938.

In one of the raids to the villages in June 1943, Wan was captured by the Japanese soldiers and brutally gang-raped. Twice again - each time lasting for a month - she fell to the hands of the Japanese and endured hideous torture and sex slavery.

"I want people to know what happened," Wan said, her voice cracking. "The word 'comfort woman' gives people no idea of the beastly brutality we have suffered."

Coming out with her story in 1992, Wan was the first Chinese woman to tell her wartime trauma of sex slavery to the public.

"Comfort women" refers to a system of forcing women in many countries under Japanese occupation to be sex slaves to the invading army, with the acquiescence of Japanese authorities, said Su Zhiliang, director of the Comfort Women Studies Centre at Shanghai Normal University.

"Comfort women is the only known institutionalised sexual aggression against women," he said. "It was a violation of basic humanity on an unprecedented scale."

More than half the 400,000 women victims of the system were Chinese. Others included Taiwanese, Koreans, Filipinas, Thais, Indonesians, Indians, and Eurasians.

The Chinese government has refrained from taking an official stance on comfort women. The movement seeking compensation and an apology has been spearheaded by non-government groups like the study centre at Shanghai Normal University.

**HOUSES OF SHAME**

At least 83 "Comfort Women lodges" have been identified in Shanghai, more than in any other Chinese city. On Qianchang road, in the shadow of shining skyscrapers of the Pudong New Development Area, a two-storey brick building compound housed one of the lodges.

Chen Bingrong, a retired physics teacher whose family once owned the property, recalled that one spring day in 1943 three Japanese soldiers evicted his family and a few tenants from the compound.

A few days later, two dozen or so young Chinese women moved in but were never allowed to leave the compound.

"We knew our house had been turned into a brothel because we saw a constant stream of Japanese soldiers and officers coming to the house."

Sometimes a group of 40 to 50 soldiers arrived. The queue stretched along one side of the compound around the corner to the street, he said.

The number of visitors dwindled in 1945 and after the Japanese surrendered in the summer of that year the guards and the women vanished.

When the family moved back to the compound, Chen, then a young man in his early 20's, found a crude examination table, apparently designed for army doctors to check the women for venereal diseases.

**APOLOGY AND COMPENSATION**

Demands for an apology and compensation for the surviving comfort women have become international in scope, as more violence has been committed against women in wars in the former Yugoslavia, Rwanda, Algeria, and other ethnic strife.

The Japanese government has denied legal responsibility. Attempts by non-government organisations (NGOs) for war compensation legislation are moving slowly because right-wing politicians see wartime sex slavery simply as a form of prostitution.

In the late 1990s, comfort women in Taiwan rejected a proposed compensation package - delivered by a Japanese NGO - because it did not come with an official apology.

In 1997, a Japanese civic group offered compensation to some South Korean comfort women, followed by an additional amount last month, despite opposition from the Seoul government who insisted that any funds

be made through formal state channels, a Korean newspaper said.

Sheldon Harris, author of "Factories of Death: Japanese Biological Weapons 1932-45," said the Japanese government was unlikely to face the issue squarely without a long period of litigation and worldwide boycott of Japanese products.

But Barry Fisher, an American lawyer and human rights activist, was more optimistic.

He said many in Japan had come to understand the risk of letting the wound fester 55 years after the war ended.

"It is not in the interest of those Japanese people who are economically, politically and socially involved with Asia to live with the cancer," Fisher said.

"They must deal with it quickly and surgically with the sharpness of the traditional Samurai sword."