

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

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## **Japan: Appeals for compensation fall on deaf ears**

Amnesty International today called on the Japanese government to accept full responsibility for crimes committed against women condemned to sexual slavery by their Japanese captors -- so-called "comfort women" -- before and during the Second World War.

In a comprehensive report entitled "Still Waiting After 60 years: Justice for Survivors of Japan's Military Sexual Slavery System", the organization outlines the brutal treatment suffered by "comfort women" and the excuses given over the years to deny responsibility for their suffering. Up to 200,000 women were sexually enslaved by the Japanese military before and during the Second World War, many of whom were under the age of 20, with some as young as 12. The report also provides recommendations to the Japanese government and the international community on ensuring justice for the remaining survivors.

"The Japanese government must finally right the wrongs of over 60 years by providing full reparations to the survivors of this horrific system of sexual slavery," said Purna Sen, Director of Amnesty International's Asia-Pacific Programme.

Survivors of the "comfort women" system are now elderly and unknown numbers have died without justice, an adequate public apology or direct compensation from the Japanese government. For years, the Japanese government consistently denied responsibility for its system of military sexual slavery and only when evidence directly linking the Japanese government's role came to light did the government finally admit responsibility.

"Apologies offered to former "comfort women" have been inadequate, vague and unacceptable to survivors. Moreover, the Asian Women's Fund fails to meet international standards of reparation and is perceived by survivors as a way of buying their silence," said Purna Sen.

"This is a current human rights issue that should not be relegated to the past -- it is about lives that have been destroyed and the continued denial of justice and reparation," said Purna Sen. "Reparations in this case are not just a moral obligation. Any state that commits war crimes and crimes against humanity such as rape and sexual slavery also has a legal obligation to provide full reparations and a promise of non-repetition directly to the survivors."

The Japanese government has argued that rape was not a war crime until 1949, when it was

incorporated into the Fourth Geneva Convention. Amnesty International argues in its report, however, that there is a wealth of evidence that rape in the context of armed conflict was a crime under customary international law during the entire period in which the Japanese government operated its system of sexual slavery.

"I was taken to China when I was 16 years old," says South Korean national Lee Ok-sun, now aged 79. She was abducted and taken to Yanbian, north-eastern China -- where she was forced into sexual slavery in a "comfort station".

"The age range of the girls was from 14 to 17 and they forced us to serve 40 to 50 soldiers a day," she says. "It was impossible to serve that many men, so I refused and was beaten. If a woman refused they cut her body with a knife; some girls were stabbed. Some girls got diseases and died... It was a painful experience -- there was not enough food, not enough sleep and I couldn't even kill myself. I desperately wanted to escape." Lee Ok-sun was in China for 58 years before she was able to return to South Korea.

"We want our experience to be written in history so that the next generation and people in other countries will know what happened to us and for us to be given justice," said Lola Pilar of the Philippines, in the Amnesty International report. "The Japanese government has to admit to what the Japanese soldiers did. We need an apology and compensation from the Japanese government"

"I want justice more than the money," echoes survivor Lola Amonita, also of the Philippines. "I want a public apology from the Japanese government."

## **Background**

"Comfort women" is a term used to euphemistically refer to young females from the Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam, Malaysia, China, South and North Korea, Japan, Indonesia, the Netherlands and other Japanese-occupied countries or regions who were forced in to sexual slavery by Japanese troops before and during the Second World War.

The abuse took place at "comfort stations" established by the Japanese authorities wherever they were based during the course of the wars. Women were brought to the stations often through abduction or deception; sometimes they were bought from their destitute parents.

Despite the widespread prevalence of what was essentially institutionalized rape, the issue of "comfort women" was ignored by the International Military Tribunal for the Far East, set up after the Second World War to prosecute Japan's war criminals. Only during the Dutch military tribunal in Indonesia were prosecutions made -- for the sexual enslavement of Dutch women only; similar crimes against Indonesian women went unpunished.

Humiliated and ashamed, "comfort women" survivors remained silent for decades before finally speaking out in the early 1990s in response to persistent denials by Japanese government of its involvement in the system. Survivors are severely traumatized, many never married and many were unable to have children as a result of injuries sustained through repeated rape or due to contracting sexually transmitted diseases.

The Japanese government denied responsibility for the "comfort women" system until evidence directly linking the Japanese government's role was discovered by Professor Yoshimi Yoshiaki in 1992; the Japanese government subsequently issued several official apologies but these have not been acceptable to the survivors. Moreover, the Japanese government, in response to tireless campaigning by survivors of the sexual slavery system and their supporters and to international criticism, introduced the Asian Women's Fund in 1995. However the fund is perceived by survivors as a way for the Japanese

government to evade its international legal responsibilities towards them.

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