

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT

13 August 2010
AI Index: ASA 22/007/2010

Missed opportunity for Japan to provide justice for “comfort women”

On the 65th anniversary of the end of World War II, Japan has yet again missed an opportunity to apologize unequivocally, accept legal responsibility and provide adequate reparations for the survivors of Japan’s military sexual slavery system (euphemistically termed the “comfort women” system).

29 August 2010 is also the 100th anniversary of the annexation of Korea by Japan. To mark the occasion Prime Minister Naoto Kan issued a statement expressing “deep remorse” for the period of colonization of South Korea but failed to mention the “comfort women”.

This is a serious omission given that the military sexual slavery system developed with Japanese colonization and military expansion across Asia. The majority of the victims enslaved were Chinese, Korean, Taiwanese, Filipina, Malaysian, Indonesian, Dutch, East Timorese and Japanese.

For example, Korean teenager Mun Pil-gi was told by a neighbour that she could go to a factory and make money. Instead she was taken to China on a train with 20 other girls where she was incarcerated in a “comfort station” for around 3 years until the end of the war. Before passing away in 2008 she said, “The Japanese government should compensate us. They must apologise. We have suffered enough. I can’t describe in words how we suffered.” The remaining survivors of Japan’s sexual slavery system are now elderly; many, like Mun Pil-gi, have died without seeing justice.

Up to 200,000 women were sexually enslaved by the Japanese Imperial Army from around 1932 to the end of World War II. The vast majority of women enslaved were under the age of 20; some girls were as young as 12 when they were abducted. The Japanese Imperial Army used violence and deception to obtain women and girls. Survivors rarely spoke of their experiences even as they suffered from physical and mental ill-health, isolation, shame and often extreme poverty as a result of their enslavement.

It was not until August 1991, forty-six years after the end of the war that Kim Hak-soon became the first survivor to speak publicly of her ordeal. Aged 74, her decision was based on having no living relatives to be affected by her past. She in turn inspired many other women to break their silence, including Lola Rosa Hensen who spoke on television and radio in the Philippines in 1992 urging survivors not to feel ashamed but come forward and demand justice.

The Japanese government has vigorously defended its legal position on this issue, persistently maintaining that all issues of compensation have been settled by post war peace treaties. However, such treaties did not recognize the system of sexual slavery and did not provide for reparations for the individual victims. Amnesty International believes that the actions of the Japanese government in denying and obstructing justice only compounds the human rights violations committed against the women. If the government had acknowledged the crimes and provided the victims with reparations in a timely manner, they may have been able to address the mental and physical harm and not have been forced to live in shame and poverty.

In May 2010 at the 14th UN Human Rights Council in Geneva the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women issued a report which notes that as victims of sexual crimes, the survivors “do not want to receive economic compensation without an official apology and official recognition of State responsibility”. During a visit to Japan in May 2010, Navi Pillay, the High Commissioner for Human Rights also appealed to the government to move beyond “half measures” and “deal once and for all with the “comfort women” issue by apologizing and providing redress to thousands of women victims of wartime sexual slavery”.

Since 2007, the USA, Canada, the Netherlands, South Korea, Taiwan and the European Parliament, which represents the 27 member states of the EU, have all passed resolutions calling on the government of Japan to provide justice for these women. In Japan, since March 2008, 21 local governments have passed resolutions supporting the call for justice and reparations to be provided to the survivors of Japan’s military sexual slavery system.

UN Treaty Bodies including the Human Rights Committee, the Committee Against Torture, and the Committee for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women have all called on the government of Japan to provide justice to the “comfort women”.

Amnesty International calls on the Government of Japan to immediately provide redress to those who have suffered, specifically to:

- accept full responsibility, including legal responsibility, in a way that publicly acknowledges the harm these women have suffered;
- apologize fully and unequivocally for the crimes committed against the women;
- provide adequate and effective reparations to survivors and their immediate families directly from the government;
- include an accurate account of the sexual slavery system in Japanese educational textbooks on the Second World War.

/ENDS

Public Document

For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566 or email: press@amnesty.org

International Secretariat, Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW, UK
www.amnesty.org