

Comfort Women Decry Prime Minister's Comments

The Women's Initiatives for Gender Justice joins surviving "comfort women" in denouncing Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's recent comments claiming over 200,000 women sexually enslaved by the Japanese Imperial Army from 1932 to 1945 had not been coerced into sexual slavery by the former Japanese Army. Mr Abe's statement backtracks from a 1993 apology by the government's chief spokesperson, known as the Kono statement, acknowledging Japan's role in wartime prostitution.

While Mr Abe subsequently offered a fresh apology in response to the uproar over his remarks and said he stands by Japan's 1993 apology. However, his remarks still fall short of demands made by victims/survivors to clearly acknowledge the wartime military's role in sexually enslaving women.

Despite overwhelming evidence of such crimes, the International Military Tribunal for the Far East established in 1946 to prosecute Japan's war criminals did not address the issue of "comfort women". Although victims/survivors support groups have called for a formal apology from the government and official compensation, some governing party lawmakers contend the women were professional sex workers and the Japanese military authorities were not directly responsible for establishing or operating brothels.

In view of Japan's impending ratification of the Rome Statute, it is particularly important that Japan upholds the principles embodied in the Rome Statute and demonstrates its commitment to gender justice and accountability for violations of international humanitarian law.

In December 2000, the Women's International War Crimes Tribunal on Japan's Military Sexual Slavery was convened by Asian women and human rights organizations, including the Korean Council, VAWW-NET Japan and ASCENT Philippines and supported by international NGOs to adjudicate Japan's military sexual violence, in particular the enslavement of "comfort women," in an effort to hold perpetrators of wartime sexual violence accountable and to end the ongoing cycle of impunity for wartime sexual violence against women.

The proceedings demonstrated that the institutionalisation of rape and sexual slavery of girls and women was an integral part of the Japanese military campaigns. In its preliminary judgment, the Women's Tribunal found Emperor Hirohito guilty, and the State of Japan responsible, for the crimes of rape and sexual slavery as crimes against humanity. The Tribunal's Final Judgment was rendered in December 2001 and found all ten defendants named in the Common Indictment guilty, either as individuals or as superiors, of crimes against humanity.

Among the Tribunal's recommendations to the Government of Japan were the full acknowledgement of its responsibility and liability for the establishment of the "comfort system", the issuance of an apology taking legal responsibility and giving guarantees of non-repetition, and compensation to the victims and survivors in amounts adequate to redress the harm and deter its future occurrence. To date, there has yet to be an official government apology fully and unambiguously acknowledging Japan's responsibility and liability for the sexual enslavement of women during the Second World War.

According to the International Commission of Jurists, "it is indisputable that these women were forced, deceived, coerced and abducted to provide sexual services to the Japanese military ... [Japan] violated customary norms of international law concerning war crimes, crimes against humanity, slavery and the trafficking in women and children ... Japan should take full responsibility now, and make suitable restitution to the victims and their families."¹

¹ International Commission of Jurists, November 1994

The Women's Initiatives for Gender Justice urges the Government of Japan to implement the Tribunal's recommendations.

To learn more about the issue, see: <http://www.comfort-women.org/v2/index.html> and <http://www.iccwomen.org/wigjdraft1/Archives/oldWCGJ/tokyo/index.htm>