

# Official Japanese report whitewashes wartime sexual slavery

By Ben McGrath  
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The Japanese government of Shinzo Abe released a report on June 20 throwing into doubt a 1993 apology for the army's World War II exploitation of women as sex slaves. In the process, Japan has angered its neighbors South Korea and China, from where many of the victims were taken.

The 1993 Kono Statement, released by then Chief Cabinet Secretary Yohei Kono, was a formal but limited apology for the use of "comfort women" during the war. Approximately 200,000 women and girls, mainly from Korea, but also China and other countries, were forced into military brothels.

Written by a government-appointed panel of five "experts," the review called into question whether the victims were forced into prostitution. Referring to investigations at the time of the Kono Statement, the report asserts: "The recognition obtained through these series of studies was that it was not possible to confirm that women were 'forcefully recruited.'"

The report also claimed that the South Korean government was involved in writing the Kono Statement, with Seoul demanding that Japan's apology should refer to the coercion of the comfort women.

The report even declared that among the 16 victims interviewed before the release of the Kono Statement, "there were some who spoke indifferently and others whose memories had become confused."

Interviews with former comfort women paint a different picture. Kim Bok-dong recounted the Japanese military's coercive measures in a 2012 interview published on Amnesty International's blog, *Livewire* :

"I was 14 years old when I was forced into sexual slavery by the Japanese government. They said they would hire me as a factory worker, but instead they dragged many of us to Taiwan, Hong Kong, China,

Malaysia and Indonesia. I was with the army headquarters so I went almost everywhere with them. There are no words to describe what the soldiers did to me."

The South Korean government predictably reacted with anger to last week's report, summoning Japanese ambassador Koro Bessho on Monday to lodge a complaint over the revision. Foreign Affairs Vice Minister Cho Tae-yong chastised Bessho saying: "The coercion of comfort women is an historical fact that the international community recognizes. The more the Abe government attempts to undermine the Kono statement, the more its credibility and international reputation will be damaged."

China reacted similarly. Foreign ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying demanded that Japan "face up to history and uphold the spirit of the Kono Statement," saying: "The forced recruitment of comfort women by the Japanese military is a serious crime against humanity."

In an attempt at damage control, Japan's Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga stated on Friday: "Nothing has changed about the Japanese government's position that it will not revise the Kono Statement." In reality, the official report is an attempt by the Japanese government to whitewash the past crimes of Japanese imperialism.

By undermining the Kono Statement, the Abe administration is taking another step in its wider agenda of remilitarizing Japan. Abe is preparing a new generation to be dragooned into fighting wars of imperialist aggression, by justifying the Japanese Imperial Army's role during World War II.

Since coming to power in December 2012, the Abe government has raised military spending for the first time in over a decade while seeking to end the

constitutional constraints on Japan's ability to wage war. Last December, signaling the start of an ideological offensive, Abe visited the infamous Yasukuni Shrine where 14 class-A war criminals are interred and which stands as a symbol of Japanese militarism.

Right-wing officials, appointed by Abe, have also sought to cover up the crimes of the past. Katsuto Momii, placed on public broadcaster NHK's board of governors, tried to excuse the use of comfort women by saying the practice "was everywhere in Europe ... In the current moral climate, the use of comfort women would be wrong. But it was a reality of those times."

Another Abe-appointee NHK governor, Naoki Hyatuka, denied in February that the 1937 Rape of Nanjing took place. The week-long atrocity carried out by Japanese soldiers left up to 300,000 Chinese civilians and soldiers dead.

Japan is being remilitarized with the Obama administration's encouragement, as part of its "pivot to Asia," aimed at undermining Chinese influence and encircling it militarily. Japan has taken an increasingly confrontational stance toward China, particularly over the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea. Last month, Japan sent two military reconnaissance planes to spy on Chinese and Russian joint naval drills, leading to confrontations with Chinese fighter jets and highlighting the danger of war.

However, Washington's support for Tokyo has come at the price of upsetting Washington's other ally in North East Asia, South Korea. The United States has attempted to draw the two neighbors closer together, but to little avail. The ruling elites in both countries are whipping up nationalism to divert rising domestic social tensions. Seoul regularly incites anti-Japanese sentiment in order to distract the population from worsening unemployment and social inequality.

In its response to the Kono Statement review, Washington lightly chided Tokyo. US State Department spokeswoman Jen Psaki stated: "We've consistently encouraged Japan to approach this and other issues arising from the past in a manner that is conducive to building stronger relations with its neighbors." Psaki continued: "Because South Korea and Japan have so many common interests, it's important that they find a way to resolve the past in the most productive manner and look to the future."

Abe's government is facing mounting opposition at home to its remilitarization campaign. A recent Kyodo News poll found that 55.4 percent of people oppose Abe's plans to reinterpret or revise the constitution to end limitations on the Japanese military, up from 48.1 percent the previous month. An even greater number of people—74.1 percent—said Abe should not set a deadline for ending discussion on the issue.

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