

Japan and South Korea reach agreement over comfort women

By Ben McGrath
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The foreign ministers of Japan and South Korea met Monday in Seoul to formalise a deal over the long-running dispute regarding “comfort women.” The decision will undoubtedly be welcomed in Washington which has been pressuring its two allies to mend their rift so as to collaborate more closely in the US “pivot to Asia” against China.

Japanese foreign minister Fumio Kishida offered a limited apology over the treatment of South Korean “comfort women” who were forced to act as sex slaves for the Japanese army during the 1930s and 1940s. He promised a one-time payment of 1 billion yen (\$8.3 million) to a fund to be established by Seoul for the 46 surviving victims.

“The issue of comfort women, with an involvement of the Japanese military authorities at that time, was a grave affront to the honor and dignity of large numbers of women, and the government of Japan is painfully aware of responsibilities from this perspective,” Kishida said following his meeting with his South Korean counterpart Yun Byeong-se.

“Prime Minister of Japan, Prime Minister [Shinzo] Abe expresses anew his most sincere apologies and remorse to all the women who underwent immeasurable and painful experiences and suffered incurable physical and psychological wounds as comfort women,” Kishida added.

In response, Yun declared that the issue was “finally and irreversibly” resolved, provided “the government of Japan will steadily implement the measures specified.” He also agreed to discuss moving a “comfort woman” statue of a young girl erected in front of the Japanese embassy in Seoul in 2011 by the Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan.

“Comfort women” is the Japanese euphemism for

women who were forced to work in brothels for the Japanese military during World War II. While estimates vary, approximately 200,000 women from throughout Asia, including Korea, China, and the Philippines, were recruited, coerced, and at times physically forced into becoming comfort women.

The joint statement stopped short of saying that the Japanese military had established the comfort women system or that women were forced into serving at the brothels. This is an obvious concession to the Abe government which has been seeking to whitewash the past crimes of the Japanese military, by claiming that the army did not organize the sex slavery and that the women were not coerced.

However, historians like Yoshiaki Yoshimi have demonstrated using documents from before and after the war that the military established and ran the “comfort women” system. The women were often deceived with the help of middlemen using promises of phony jobs or outright forced into sexual slavery.

South Korean President Park Geun-hye also met with Kishida and reportedly called Abe on Monday. The two leaders held their first bilateral summit in November where they agreed to resolve the comfort women issue, which Park described as “the biggest obstacle to efforts to improve bilateral relations.”

Surviving women in South Korea were critical of the agreement. “It seems neither government cares about the victims,” said Lee Yong-su. Another woman, Gang Il-chul stated: “This is not different from the Asian Women’s Fund. Only the Japanese government’s legal compensation and official apology will be the answer for us.”

The South Korean government will likely have a difficult time selling the agreement. Both major establishment parties regularly whip up anti-Japanese

chauvinism to distract the working class from domestic social conditions. In fact, Seoul's inability to push through a military intelligence sharing agreement—encouraged by the United States—with Japan in June 2012 led to the recent downturn in relations with Tokyo.

The government of President Lee Myung-bak faced public uproar over the agreement. Hoping to save face, Lee provocatively made a trip in August 2012 to the disputed Dokdo/Takeshima islets in the Sea of Japan, becoming the first South Korean president to do so. Nationalistic recriminations followed, including over comfort women, which did not end when Park came to power in February 2013.

Prime Minister Abe worsened relations with a visit to the controversial Yasukuni war shrine in December 2013, angering Washington in the process. The Obama administration has been pressing South Korea and Japan to collaborate more closely so as to facilitate the US military build-up in North East Asia directed against China. The US has military bases in both countries.

President Obama pressured Park and Abe to take part in a trilateral summit in March 2014. Following the meeting, Obama took Abe aside for a private discussion on the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and other issues. Obama also began applying pressure specifically over the comfort women issue, describing it as an “egregious human rights violation” during a visit to Seoul in April 2014.

Abe started to temper his stance. Despite having promised to do so, Abe stopped short last year of completely revising the 1993 Kono Statement, a limited formal apology for the abuse of comfort women. However, his government did issue a report that called into question the legitimacy of existing evidence used to write the statement. The Kono Statement, named after Chief Cabinet Secretary Yohei Kono, followed the first public revelations in the early 1990s of the abuses suffered by comfort women.

For all of Seoul's talk about restoring the honor and dignity of the women, it is highly unlikely that the South Korean establishment was unaware of what happened during the war. Many politicians and military figures in the post-liberation period had served as Japanese collaborators in the colonial government or in the army, including President Park's father, the

post-war dictator Park Chung-hee, who was a lieutenant in Japan's Kwantung Army.

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