
Japan's shame

Japan's Foreign Minister Taro Aso refuses to acknowledge his family firm's use of PoWs as forced labour, writes **Christopher Reed**

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THE next time Japan's Foreign Minister Taro Aso visits Australia, there are a handful of blokes who would like to talk to him about the time they worked for his dad at the Aso family coalmine. But it would not be a cosy meeting.

The former Aso workers are Australian prisoners of war who in 1945 were forced to endure slave conditions at one of the pits owned by Aso's family business, which dates back to the 19th century. Aso Mining Co (now the Aso Group) was one of many Japanese corporations that illicitly coerced Allied PoWs into heavy labour during the Pacific war.

"I'd like to meet Mr Aso," says Joe Coombs, 85, of Regents Park, Sydney. Coombs is a former infantry corporal and one of nine known prisoners still alive who worked at Aso. "I'd like to tell him what happened to us there and how we were treated by his people: the beatings, the starvation diet, the back-breaking work. Then I'd invite him to apologise."

Coombs is one of four PoWs exploited by Aso's family who spoke to The Australian. The others were either too ill to speak or didn't wish to dredge up the past.

Aso, who yesterday conducted a private visit to the Juganji temple where foreign PoWs' remains were kept, has never acknowledged his family firm's role in forced labour during the war. His father, Takakichi, ran Aso Mining during the Pacific war and Taro was its head from 1973 to 1979, before entering politics with the Liberal Democratic Party.

The Nazis enslaved millions of people, mainly East Europeans, but Germany has paid billions in compensation. No Japanese government has apologised to victims or given them a cent.

Legally, post-war treaties freed Japan from any obligation to make payments; however, these were signed before the extent of war crimes was known.

In 2001, the Australian Government paid former Japanese PoWs \$25,000 each and eventually 7300 were compensated. But there is still the question of hundreds of millions of dollars in unpaid wages.

Lack of atonement and reparations for war crimes in Asia has become the chief obstacle to normal relations between Japan and its neighbours, including China and the two Koreas. Of late, this has involved Aso personally, with disclosures of his family links not only to thousands of Korean slave labourers but to Allied PoWs as well.

In the final year of the war, 197 Australian prisoners were held at Camp No.26 in Fukuoka prefecture in the southern island of Kyushu, which supplied labour to Aso's Yoshikuma mine. Two men died: Signalmen John Watson, 32, of the 8th Signals division, from NSW,

and Private Leslie Edgar George Wilkie, 28, of the ALF 2/10 Ordnance Corps, from Queensland. There were also 101 British and two Dutch prisoners. They were imprisoned in appalling conditions, starved and beaten. They worked deep underground in dangerous seams where tunnel ceilings often collapsed. They were surrounded by electrified fences 3m high and slept in vermin-infested quarters, and their pitiful "wages" were never paid. Many died of ailments associated with malnutrition and overwork.

Farmer John Hall, 87, from Trundle, near Parkes in NSW, a former private with the 2/19th battalion, recalls: "We did 12-hour shifts and never saw daylight except a couple of days off a month. We had 1 1/2 cups of rice a day and uncooked leaves as greens, and were beaten and bashed all the time."

Hall, who lost 25kg during 3 1/2 years as a PoW, also toiled in shipyards before arriving at Aso Mining. There, he remembers, "we had to push skips holding a ton of coal, and if you slipped or failed you were beaten with rifle butts or fists. Once I was smashed in the face with a rifle butt for stealing an onion and I still wake at nights sweating and see that guard."

Bill Leech from Kingscliffe, in northern NSW, who was also a 2/9th private, would like to meet Aso, who visited Sydney in March for talks with Alexander Downer and Condoleezza Rice. But Leech doesn't expect much from him. "They don't apologise and they don't have any respect for us, do they? They should have given us some compensation decades ago, when we applied, but they won't."

"I can't forgive them and I can't forget. Why doesn't Aso admit what happened? An apology would do, maybe ... The horrors they made me suffer ruined my health ... Then there were those who didn't come back. I still remember two, Doyle and Kacergis were my mates, but we were split up. I don't even know where they died."

Former ambulance corporal Mick Kildey, 85, from Burleigh Heads, on Queensland's Sunshine Coast, would like to "give MrAso a piece of my mind (and) tell him what happened. How we were beaten half to death, starved and covered with vermin you could never get rid of. How we never had enough to eat, not enough clothes to keep warm, sent down to dangerous pit levels the Japanese would not go."

Kildey also knew Watson, who died. "I tended to him, but he was dying. I always remember just bumping his backside and he whimpered in pain because he was just skin and bone." Watson and Wilkie are buried in the Commonwealth Cemetery in Yokohama.

Aso, 65, the most outspoken nationalist in Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi's cabinet, has been harshly criticised for his right-wing nationalist views and unapologetic attitude towards Japan's imperial past. A New York Times editorial attacked him for "offensive and inflammatory" remarks. Aso has never addressed the slave labour issue and has ignored pleas for recompense or an apology.

Even before he was appointed Foreign Minister last October, Aso demonstrated an apologist attitude towards Japan's colonial history and imperial wars. He angered millions of Koreans by suggesting that during Japanese colonial rule they voluntarily adopted Japanese names; in fact, Tokyo passed a law compelling them to do so.

Last year, in a speech at the opening of a museum in Kyushu, Aso echoed pre-war Japanese racism by describing Japan as unique in terms of culture, language, history and race.

He is also known to be associated with the extreme right-wing Nippon Kaigi (Japan Conference), which has reacted with hostility to attempts by scholars, historians and journalists to uncover details about Japan's extensive use of Chinese, Korean and Allied forced labour during the war years.

Frequent requests to the Japanese foreign ministry for comment or confirmation of facts

from Aso have been met with silence. A foreign ministry spokeswoman claimed to have no knowledge of a recent article about the Aso family's connection to forced PoW labour.

Aso is related by marriage to the Japanese royal family and maintains close links with his family firm, whose president is Aso's younger brother, Yutaka. In 2001 it entered a joint venture with Lafarge Cement of France. Last December the French ambassador in Tokyo awarded Yutaka Aso the Legion d'Honneur at a champagne reception where Taro Aso was a guest of honour.

On the question of whether the latter's government post is tenable in view of his background, the German policy offers context. In a nation that has paid \$US6 billion to victims of Nazi enslavement, family links alone do not disqualify citizens from public office. But they are expected to show atonement or make amends. Because of his declared views, Aso would not be admitted to any government in Berlin, a German embassy official in Tokyo says.

Aso, the grandson of a former conservative prime minister, may rise higher in Tokyo. He is one of three candidates to succeed Koizumi in September. Japanese critic Tatsuro Hanada, a Waseda University professor, says: "Aso's attitudes and behaviour are a political issue and his qualifications an important subject for the Japanese public."

There is, however, no public debate in Japan and Aso's connections to the slave labour issue have not been disclosed in leading Japanese newspapers.

Besides the moral issue of Japanese wartime cruelty - Japan's record of PoW deaths was far worse than that of the Allies - the more straightforward question of money remains, even though, as Treasurer Peter Costello put it in 2001, no compensation "could (ever) redress the pain and suffering".

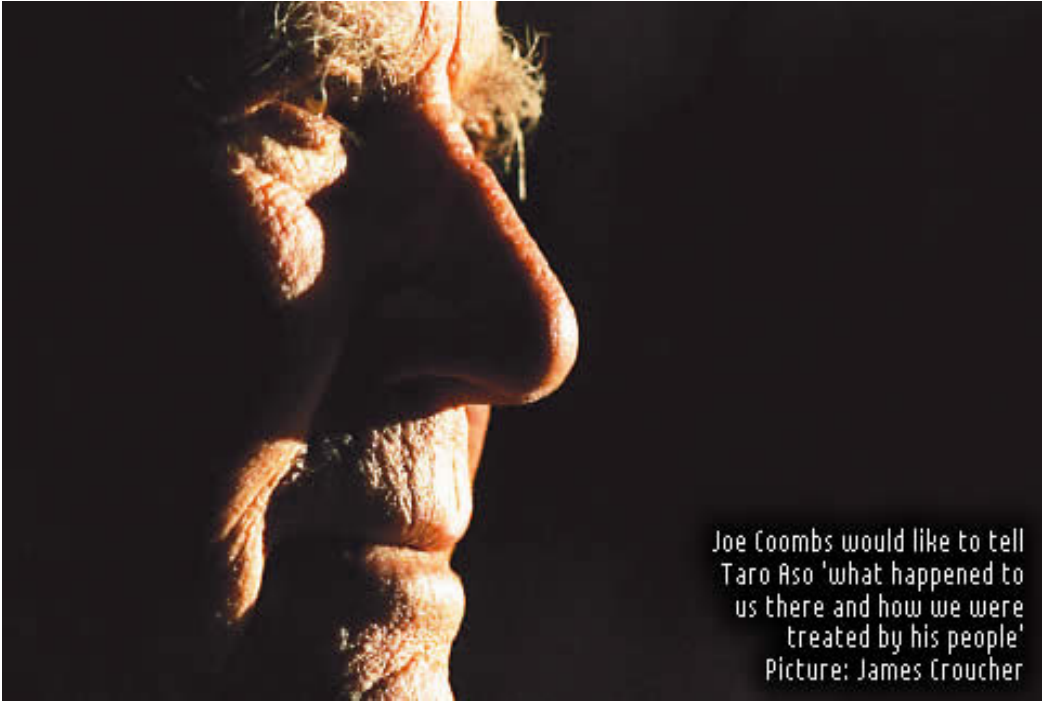
Thousands of Allied prisoners, and many more Korean and Chinese forced labourers, were supposed to be paid for their work. It amounted to a few yen a week over several years for each man, but few received anything. In 1946 the US occupation authorities ordered the cash kept by the employer corporations from at least the Asian victims to be deposited in the treasury.

American scholar **William Underwood** has been tracking down the missing millions as part of an academic research project at Kyushu University. The secrecy, and likely dishonesty, of the government in Tokyo about its hiding place may yet be unravelled. Underwood believes the total added up to at least \$US2million; with inflation and interest, it would today be closer to \$US2billion (\$2.7billion). Yet, 60 years on, the money still sits in the Bank of Japan and the Japanese Government, while grudgingly acknowledging its existence, declines to discuss it.

The arrears deposited by corporations remain what Underwood calls a black hole, because the Government says it cannot match individuals with the bank's stash. Corporations such as the Aso Group say they have no records. "The problem is that the Japanese Government and corporations are the gatekeepers, and their consistent, joint track record has been one of cover-up, dishonesty and denial," Underwood says. "Can Japan realistically expect historical reconciliation as long as it so resolutely evades an honest accounting of its past conduct? It appears the Government intends to keep these unpaid wages frozen for all eternity."

The next generation is, however, taking up the fight. Among them are the seven children of Hall, whose daughter Marilyn is writing a letter on his behalf to Aso. "We're not going to mention the Geneva Conventions or the peace treaties or anything like that," she says. "This is a debt, unfinished business, and the Japanese are very good at business." The message that the Halls and others have for Aso is simple: Will you please give back the money your dad swindled out of our dad?

Christopher Reed is a British freelance journalist based in Japan.



Joe Coombs would like to tell
Taro Aso 'what happened to
us there and how we were
treated by his people'
Picture: James Croucher