

## **Aso Revelations on Wartime POW Labor Highlight the Need for a Real National Archive in Japan**

**[Japanese government official documents appended]**

**[Japanese translation available [here](#)]**

**Lawrence Repeta**

Prime Minister Aso Taro's admission that his family company employed prisoner-of-war labor during the final months of World War II may one day be seen as a milestone in Japan's struggle to contend with its own national history. In response to persistent questioning by an opposition lawmaker on the floor of the national parliament on January 6, Aso acknowledged the truth of recent disclosures of POW work at the Aso Mining Company in 1945.[1]

This exchange came three weeks after a senior official of the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare confirmed the authenticity of a 1946 report submitted by Aso Mining on the use of 300 Australian, English and Dutch POWs beginning in May 1945.[2] This action by a national government ministry was unprecedented. Mr. Aso heads Japan's Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), which has dominated Japanese politics since it was formed more than fifty years ago. Throughout the postwar era, leading members of the LDP have often denied reports of wartime abuses or declared there is no evidence to support criticism of Japan's wartime actions. In response to one recent example, the US House of Representatives took the extraordinary step of passing a resolution in July 2007 demanding that Japan "formally acknowledge, apologize, and accept historical responsibility" for military sexual slavery (commonly known as the "comfort women" issue) during its colonial and wartime occupation of Asia (House Resolution 121 of 2007). This followed a string of denials and protestations of lack of evidence for such practices by senior LDP politicians as well documented in the [report by Kinue Tokudome](#) on "Passage of H.Res. 121 on 'Comfort Women', the US Congress and Historical Memory in Japan."

Against this background of an established pattern of accusation and denial, the matter-of-fact statement by a senior Ministry official on the floor of the national Diet in December confirming POW use at Aso Mining took many by surprise.

The path to disclosure followed a circuitous route, with a prominent role played by the document repository of the US [National Records and Archives Administration](#) (NARA) located in suburban Maryland, outside Washington, D.C. It was there in March 2006 that Fukubayashi Toru, a member of a citizen group called [POW Research Network Japan](#) uncovered a report submitted by Aso Mining in response to demands by Allied Occupation authorities for information on the whereabouts and condition of Allied POWs (Appendix I). This 11-page report detailed living and working conditions for the 101 Australian, 97 British and 2 Dutch POWs made to work at the company's Yoshikuma mine in Kyushu commencing in May 1945. As in the disclosure of atrocities committed in the Nanjing Massacre, the case of the military comfort women, biowarfare Unit 731, compulsory mass suicides in the Battle of Okinawa and many others, it was Japanese researchers who took the lead in discovering and disclosing the evidence.[3]



*Ore cars at the Aso Yoshikuma coal mine in Fukuoka Prefecture, where 300 Allied POWs were forced to work in 1945 [source: Aso Hyakunen Shi (The 100-Year History of Aso), Iizuka, Fukuoka: Aso Cement Co., 1975]*

Coverage by the international news media included a November 2006 article by New York Times correspondent Norimitsu Onishi.[4] One of the most powerful leaders of Japan's LDP, Mr. Aso served at that time as Foreign Minister. Soon after the Times article appeared, Japan's Consulate General in New York published a detailed rebuttal on its website attacking various details of the story. Regarding Onishi's statement that Aso Mining used "Asian and Western forced laborers," Japan's Consulate General had this to say:

The Government of Japan is not in a position to comment on employment forms and conditions of a private company, Aso Mining, at that time. However, our government has not received any information the company has used forced laborers. It is totally unreasonable to make this kind of judgmental description without presenting any evidence.

This statement remained on the Consulate General website for more than two years and was removed in December 2008, following the disclosures by the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare that prompted an investigation by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. (The full text of the Consulate General statement is presented in Appendix II.)

Japan's domestic news media devoted little attention to this issue from the 2006 revelations until the Prime Minister's admission in January 2009. Historian William Underwood, whose recent Ph.D. dissertation concerns ongoing reparations movements for forced labor in wartime Japan, says that "Japan's news media treated this as a taboo virtually all the way until Aso himself acknowledged the truth. Throughout this time, Aso has served either as Foreign Minister or Prime Minister. Even now, reporting is minimal." Much of Underwood's research on redress activities involving Allied POWs and Chinese and Korean forced laborers in Japan during the war years is available in the Japan Focus archives.

Japan has no equivalent to NARA, the US agency with authority to oversee document retention practices throughout the US federal government and to maintain records of historical value. There is an agency known as the [National Archive of Japan](http://www.na-nippon.gov.jp/), but it has no

authority to promulgate rules governing record management by other government offices or to demand that records be transferred to its care. In practice, each Ministry and other government agency decides which records to keep, which to transfer to the archive, and which to destroy.

The government records uncovered in this instance were found by officials of the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare in response to a request by lawmaker Yukihiro Fujita of the opposition Democratic Party. Fujita had obtained copies of the material uncovered at NARA in 2006 and submitted them for confirmation. In response, the Ministry delivered copies of four related but different records in its possession (Appendix III).

In comments in the national parliament on December 22, 2008, Mr. Oikawa Katsura explained that Japan's wartime government established a "POW Information Bureau" in 1941. When that office was abolished in 1957, its records were transferred to the Ministry. There they remained, undisturbed for more than fifty years, until the current controversy arose. However, the Japanese government has not produced a copy of the report compiled by Aso Mining Company in 1946, even though Japan's POW Information Bureau submitted the report to Occupation authorities that same year.

Article 22 of Japan's freedom of information act (FOIA) requires government agencies to establish rules governing maintenance of records; moreover, all records in the possession of agencies such as the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare are subject to disclosure requests under that statute. In the present case, Mr. Fujita made his request directly to the Ministry without filing such a request. However, the scope of application of Japan's FOIA is broad and there is no doubt that anyone, whether in Japan or abroad, can file requests for such documents.

Open government advocates have lobbied for creation of a more robust national archive in Japan for years. A panel of experts was appointed in 2003 under the sponsorship of then Chief Cabinet Secretary Fukuda Yasuo (later Prime Minister) to advise the government on policies concerning the proper "management, preservation and use" of public documents. This committee produced a pair of lengthy reports with recommendations for a new national system of record preservation, which have yet to result in legislation.

In the course of their research, committee members visited national archives in South Korea, China, Canada and the United States. To underscore Japan's weak efforts to preserve historical records, the committee compared resources allocated to this activity by Japan and selected countries. It found that the US national archive employs a staff of 2500 persons, Canada 660, China 560 and South Korea 130. The number for Japan's national archive: 42.

The popularity of the Liberal Democratic Party has sharply declined since the retirement of Koizumi Junichiro as prime minister in 2006. The Democratic Party won control of the Upper House of Japan's parliament in elections held the following year. It was then that Mr. Fujita himself won his current seat in the Upper House. It remains to be seen whether Fujita and others will revive debate over a national archive to be charged with handling historical documents such as those disclosed by the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare last month.

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*This article benefited from the research and editorial assistance of William Underwood, a*

*Japan Focus coordinator.*

*Lawrence Repeta wrote this article for The Asia-Pacific Journal. Posted on January 25, 2009.*

*Japanese translation by Yuka Ibuki.*

*Recommended citation: Lawrence Repeta, "Aso Revelations on Wartime POW Labor Highlight the Need for a Real National Archive in Japan" The Asia-Pacific Journal, Vol. 4-3-09, January 25, 2009.*

The following recent related texts explore issues of war crimes, atrocities, historical memory, apology and compensation, offering Japanese and American archival documentation and comparative perspectives on the legal and humanitarian issues at stake.

Michael Bazylar, [Japan Should Follow the International Trend and Face Its History of World War II Forced Labor](#).

Kinue Tokudome, [Waterboarding: The Meaning for Japan](#).

Consult in addition the category "War Crimes and Atrocities" in the index for numerous related articles, particularly those by William Underwood, Oe Kenzaburo, Herbert Bix, Jennifer Lind, Philip Seaton, Mark Selden, Yuki Tanaka, Teresa Svoboda and Paul Kramer.

## NOTES

[1] Julian Ryall, "Japanese Prime Minister Taro Aso admits family used British POWs as slave labour," Telegraph (U.K.), Jan. 6, 2009.

[2] Mari Yamaguchi, "Japan says Aso's family used POW labor," Associated Press, Dec. 20, 2008.

[3] See for example

[Fujiwara Akira](#), The Nanking Atrocity: An Interpretive Overview

[Oe Kenzaburo](#), "Misreading, Espionage and "Beautiful Martyrdom": On Hearing the Okinawa 'Mass Suicides' Suit Court Verdict."

[William Underwood](#), New Era for Japan-Korea History Issues: Forced Labor Redress Efforts Begin to Bear Fruit

[Rumiko Nishino](#), The Women's Active Museum on War and Peace: Its Role in Public Education

[4] Norimitsu Onishi, "An unyielding demand for justice," The New York Times, International Herald Tribune, Nov. 15, 2006. Available [here](#).

## APPENDICES

### Appendix I:

"Matters Concerning the Investigations of POWs", report submitted by Aso Mining Company to Japanese government's POW Information Bureau on Jan. 24, 1946.

\* PDF [HERE](#)

(JPEG images below).

**Appendix II:**

Web page of the Japanese Consulate General in New York, rebutting American media reports about forced labor at Aso Mining Company. Posted in November 2006 and removed in December 2008, following acknowledgment by Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, and subsequently by Prime Minister Aso, that POWs worked in the mines.

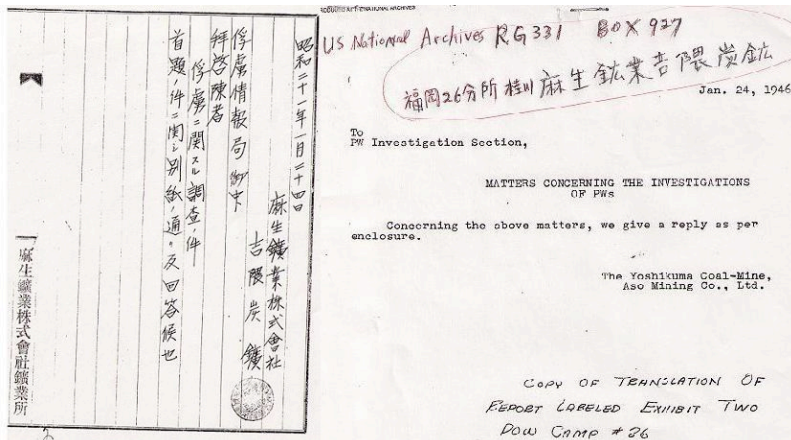
- \* PDF of English version [HERE](#)
- \* PDF of Japanese translation [HERE](#)

**Appendix III:**

Four documents disclosed by Japan Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare in November 2008, proving that Allied POWs worked at Aso Mining (in Japanese, 43 pages total).

- \* PDF [HERE](#)  
(JPEG image of cover page below)

**JPEG images from Appendix I:**



*Cover pages of the Japanese and English versions of the January 1946 report that Aso Mining submitted to the Japanese government. The Japanese version uses Aso company stationery and bears an official Aso seal. (US National Archives)*

- (3) What was demanded by the manager of the main office and the branch office, as to the medical consultation?  
There was no demand for equipment, but as to medicines, whenever we ran short of them, replenishment had been done as shown in the annexed list.
- (4) What do you know about the number of patients among the prisoners, and how much they weighed?  
The number of patients was always unstable. I can say it was at about the maximum of 20 to the minimum of 10 persons. As for body-weight, I don't know.
- (5) The percentage of death and illness was influenced by the climate and other natural conditions and the labor service assigned to them in different localities. How about these matters?  
Two men died. These men were in the hospital when they arrived at our mine. So, it seems to me that their deaths were not caused by the influences above mentioned. Four patients requiring surgical treatment were caused by labor services but these cases were not serious.
- (6) As to the matters above referred, what had been done by you to work co-operately with the authorities of PW camp, so as to keep the health of all prisoners?  
The healthiest men worked underground, the next ones cultivated farm yard which was provided to supply food for them, the weakest did light jobs in the factory. We classified them like this, according to the condition of their health, at times we alternated them around. In such a way, we always paid proper attention to their health.
- (7) Mention the circumstances virtually by what means did the manager of the branch office and his subordinates paid attention directly to keep the prisoners' health.  
Just after their arrival to our mines, we made a health investigation and capacity inquiry. From the standpoint of health, we classified the jobs. Every month we made body weight investigation. At times we examined their discharges and blood (i.e. the degree of blood sinking) etc.

## V (1) How about the babór condition?

Location	Type of work	Number of laborers
Yoshikuma 3rd mine 3rd "Oroshi"	Coal Mining	150
The 1st Farm Yard	Cultivation	80
The 2nd Farm Yard	Keeping farmyard in order	5
In the PW camp	Digging air raid shelter	10
ditto	Miscellaneous	15
ditto	Cooking	9

*The 1946 Aso report includes the company's February 1945 "Application for Permission to Use PW Labor". (US National Archives)*

COPY

No.11

Application for Permission to use PW labor

Feb. 22, 1945.

To  
General Gen Sugiyama, the minister of war,

I would like to apply for permission to use PW camp regularly.

Hanji Hangata (Agent of Yoshikuma  
Coal Mine)  
Yoshikuma 12, Katsurakawa street,  
Kaho-gun, Fukuoka-ken.

- Number of prisoners: 300
- Place where prisoners will be used: Yoshikuma Coal, Katsurakawa Street, Kahogun, Fukuoka-ken
- Type of work: Coal-mine labor
- Housing provided for the prisoners: Special buildings were used. Details shown on the attached sheet.
- Guards for prisoners: Guards to supervise the work were assigned by order of the camp commander.
- Instructions given prisoners: The prisoners received the instructions from the commander and the supervisor directed the work.
- Wages of prisoners: One yen (average), but if PW was engaged in technical work, 3 sen was added to the 1 yen.
- Work hour: 12 hours per day
- The length of time PW labor will be used: One year.

*Page five of the Aso company report, stating that 150 POWs worked in section three of the Yoshikuma mine. (US National Archives)*

**JPEG image from Appendix III:**

## 麻生鉱業関係資料一覧

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※一部個人情報のためマスキング済み

(注) 資料中の黒線は厚労省で引いたもの

《個人情報であるため提出できない資料》

- 昭和19、20年度福岡俘虜死亡一覧表
- 内地俘虜分所別死亡名簿 (死亡原因記入)
- 遺骨連名簿 福岡俘虜収容所
- ROSTER OF DECEASED AUSTRALIAN POWs IN JAPAN PROPER
- イギリス人捕虜名簿
- オランダ人捕虜名簿
- オーストラリア人捕虜名簿
- 俘虜銘々票 (捕虜の個人カード)

*“List of Documents Related to Aso Mining,” cover page for four records released by MHWL in November 2008. The cover page notes that, because personal information is involved, portions of the four documents have been blacked out by the Ministry and eight other documents are not being released at all.*

Comments

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