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THE ZEIT GIST

Aso Mining's POW labor: the evidence

Records the government seems unable — or unwilling — to find

By WILLIAM UNDERWOOD

One year after media reports that Aso Mining used 300 Allied prisoners of war for forced labor in 1945, Foreign Minister Taro Aso is refusing to confirm that POWs dug coal for his family's firm — and even challenging reporters to produce evidence.

That is not hard to do. Records produced by both Aso Mining and the Japanese government clearly show that POWs toiled at the Aso Yoshikuma mine in Fukuoka Prefecture.

But the Foreign Ministry's provocative stance is raising questions about Japan's commitment to historical reconciliation even with current Western allies.

Last year's flurry of media coverage reflected the nationalities of the World War II prisoners involved: 197 Australian, 101 British and two Dutch. Newspaper stories in *The Australian*, *The Age* and *The Sydney Morning Herald* were supplemented by newscasts by the Australian Broadcasting Corp. British readers were informed by *The Guardian*, *The Observer*,



Australian former prisoner of war Arthur Gigger, pictured below in 1940 and 2006, toiled at the Aso Yoshikuma mine (seen here in 1933) in Fukuoka during the war, a fact that Foreign Minister Taro Aso has refused to acknowledge. Australian soldiers John Watson and Leslie Edgar George Wilkie didn't survive the ordeal. KYUSHU UNIVERSITY ARCHIVE, IAN MILLARD PHOTOS



The Times and The Telegraph.

Survivors of forced labor at the Aso Yoshikuma coal mine were tracked down and interviewed. An 87-year-old Australian sent a personal letter to Foreign Minister Aso, according to The Japan Times. The former POW received no reply to his request for an apology and compensation for his unpaid work for Aso Mining Co.

Japanese-language media have treated the existence of the Aso Yoshikuma labor camp, formally known as Fukuoka POW Branch Camp 26, as a virtual taboo. Taro Aso has avoided all public comment on the matter.

But when The New York Times referred to forced labor at Aso Mining last November, the Foreign Ministry issued a startling rebuttal.

According to the Web site of the Consulate General of Japan in New York: "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 attitude was criticized by Linda Goetz Holmes, a Pacific War historian and author of a book on POW forced labor called "Unjust Enrichment." Proof that Aso Mining exploited prisoner labor originated with the Japanese government in the immediate postwar period, she noted.

"The Ministry of Foreign Affairs is continuing the disturbing Japanese government trend of being unwilling to search its own archives for the corroborating evidence of POW slave labor," Holmes said. "Instead, it is challenging others to produce such records."

On Aug. 19, 1945, the Imperial Japanese government's Committee to Negotiate Surrender delivered to U.S. Army Gen. Douglas MacArthur, by hand in Manila, a list of prison camps in Japan and the names of private companies using Allied POWs. The Fukuoka section of the document shows the Camp 26 workforce was assigned to Aso's Yoshikuma colliery. This POW camp list can be found today in the MacArthur Memorial Archives in Virginia (Record Group 4, Box 23).

On Jan. 24, 1946, Aso Mining submitted a 16-page report detailing conditions at Yoshikuma to the Japanese government's POW Information Bureau, using company stationery and attaching an English translation. Ordered by Occupation authorities investigating war crimes against POWs, the company report claims the Westerners were fed, clothed and housed better than Aso's Japanese workers and Korean labor conscripts. The Aso report includes the company's Feb. 22, 1945, letter to the Japan War Ministry requesting use of 300 Allied prisoners for one year. Camp 26 opened on May 10.

These records produced by Aso Mining can be viewed in Maryland at the U.S. National Archives (Record Group 331, Box 927). The U.S. National Archives also retain the comprehensive Camp Management Report, compiled by the Japan POW Information Bureau and submitted to American military investigators in Tokyo on June 7, 1946. It confirms the "Aso Mining Industry Company" utilized 150 of the healthiest Camp 26 prisoners in the Yoshikuma coal pits. The remainder performed farm work and camp tasks like cooking and digging bomb shelters.

Arthur Gigger, now 86 and living in South Australia, recalled 12-hour shifts and "pretty primitive conditions" deep in the Aso mine.

He arrived at Camp 26 after American firebombing destroyed the Kobe shipyard where he had worked since late 1942. He became a POW when Singapore fell to Japanese forces.

"The food was certainly meager, but clothing was our biggest problem," Gigger said. "We were down to absolute tatters by the end of the war. I don't think we'd have seen it through another winter."

The Aso-compiled records, however, say prisoners' clothing was of superior quality.

Gigger disputed other aspects of Aso Mining's description of life at Camp 26. While the company reported that prisoners could "take a rest in the recreation room," Gigger insisted "there was no such thing."

The company report also claims that, soon after Japan's surrender, prisoners thanked Aso officials for their kind treatment by giving them gifts.

"That's all bull," Gigger said with a laugh. "Absolute rubbish."

Despite its often self-serving nature, such evidence of forced labor at Aso Mining exists in the national archives of other Allied countries — and in Japan. Produced by American Occupation staff based on Japanese company reports, a copy of the "Roster of Deceased Allied POWs in Japan Proper" resides at the National Diet Library in Tokyo. The roster records the names of the two Australian soldiers who died at Aso Yoshikuma: John Watson and Leslie Edgar George Wilkie. It is accessible online at the Web site of the POW Research Network Japan, run by Japanese citizens working to clarify the historical record.

Another U.S. government document in the National Diet Library is Report No. 174, issued by the Investigation Division of GHQ's Legal Section on Feb. 1, 1946. It summarizes a two-day inspection of the Camp 26 site, referring to the statement of an Aso company official as "Exhibit One." It also lists the names and ranks of Imperial Japanese Army personnel who guarded the POWs when they were not in Aso Mining's custody.

While there were no charges of war crimes involving Camp 26, the paper trail for prisoner labor at Yoshikuma is extensive. A 1982 book published by Japan's National Defense Academy also states that the camp's prisoners worked for Aso Mining.

Yet at the peak of overseas media coverage of the Aso-POW connection last July, a Foreign Ministry spokesperson appeared to dispute wartime events. The ministry official lashed out during a press conference at "malicious news reports that contained statements contrary to facts and nevertheless have aroused a lot of debate precisely because they were very far-fetched."

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe provoked international controversy more recently by doubting the evidence for Japan's wartime system of military sexual slavery. A nonbinding resolution now being debated by the U.S. Congress calls on the Japanese government to "formally acknowledge and apologize for" the comfort women system — and to refute revisionists who deny the historical reality. That could include Foreign Minister Aso, who last February described the congressional resolution as "not based on objective facts."

Aso, 66, finished second to Abe in last year's contest for prime minister and still aspires to Japan's top post. Founded in 1872, the family firm was known as Aso Cement when Taro

Aso headed it in the 1970s. It is called Aso Group today and is run by Aso's younger brother.

Dozens of compensation lawsuits were filed over the past decade against Japanese corporations that profited from forced labor during World War II. All have now failed. Courts in Japan, the U.S. and elsewhere have agreed that the San Francisco Peace Treaty and other postwar accords waived the rights of victims to seek legal redress.

Hundreds of thousands of Nazi-era forced laborers and their heirs, by contrast, have received billions of dollars in compensation from the German and Austrian governments and corporate sectors since 2000. Formal apologies and educational initiatives were key components of those reparations programs.

The Japanese government should "take immediate action to bring about an honorable closure to the history of Japan's wartime forced labor," according to Kinue Tokudome, director of U.S.-Japan Dialogue on POWs. The California-based NPO promotes reconciliation on a humanitarian basis.

"As Japan's top diplomat and because of his family background, Foreign Minister Aso should be more sensitive to this issue and more willing to resolve it," Tokudome said. "No conscientious politician would just wait to receive the information that his family coal mine enslaved POWs and Asian civilians."

Arthur Gigger, long active in ex-POW groups in Australia, said Japan's Foreign Ministry should stop denying the reality of forced labor at Aso Mining.

"I know it happened," he said. "I was there."

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