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Japanese foreign minister accused of mining goodwill

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By Deborah Cameron, Tokyo

AUSTRALIA is being manipulated in a propaganda effort that insults the war dead, according to historians and political analysts in Tokyo.

Japan's ambitious right-wing Foreign Minister Taro Aso and Japanese Government officials are arranging for a ceremony commemorating dead prisoners of war and for a timely photo-opportunity alongside the ambassadors from Australia, Britain, the Netherlands and the US.

But the Buddhist temple hosting the ceremony has been empty of Allied soldiers' remains since the end of World War II when they were taken to an official war cemetery about 360 kilometres away.

"It is very naive and outrageously disrespectful to the memory of our POWs," said Robyn Lim, professor of international relations at Nanzan University and a former acting head of current intelligence at the Office of National Assessments in Canberra.

"The Australian ambassador should be instructed not to go."

Professor Lim, an Australian, described the planned ceremony as a "disgusting trap" and said Australia had fallen for it.

Mr Aso, a candidate to be Japan's next prime minister, is organising the ceremony following embarrassing reports about conscripted workers and prisoners of war, including Australians, who worked and died as slave labourers in mines owned by his family. The Aso family, which built its wealth from its mines, has never apologised.

Dr William Wilkie of Brisbane, a nephew of 28-year-old Edgar Wilkie who died in the Aso family mine, said he would like to attend the ceremony to remember his uncle.

"Whether Mr Aso personally sincerely regrets his family getting filthy rich on conscripted and slave labour, I think that he would be tapping into a vein of a desire for reconciliation," Dr Wilkie said. "I think we would forgive Mr Aso whether he is fair dinkum or not."

The ceremony on July 3 has been initiated by officials from Mr Aso's department, according to the head priest at Juganji Temple, Yukio Konishi.

The involvement of the ambassadors, some of whom play golf with Mr Aso, was leaked by his department.

Japanese historian Yoshiko Tamura, who founded the POW Research Network of Japan to document the history of prisoners of war, said her group was sceptical about the Foreign Minister's motives.

"We think that it is going to be a propaganda opportunity," she said. "Our group believes all the ashes of the Allied prisoners of war were transferred to Yokohama, so there are no Allied POW ashes at the temple. So if Mr Aso and all the other people have a ceremony thinking that they are paying respect to the ashes, then it is not meaningful. There is nothing there to pray for."

Mrs Tamura said that if Mr Aso was genuinely remorseful about the POWs, he would attend a remembrance service held annually in November at the official war cemetery, half an hour by train from Tokyo.

"We invite the Japanese Government to the ceremony every November but no minister has ever attended," she said.

Mrs Tamura estimated that 95 per cent of Japanese would have no idea that Allied prisoners of war were used as forced labor by Japanese companies. Last Friday the Tokyo High Court dismissed a compensation claim by Chinese nationals used as slave labour, saying that although the companies were guilty they were not liable.

Professor **William Underwood**, an expert on wartime forced labour, said the July ceremony was "a belated half measure aimed at damage control" and called for the ambassadors to insist on some truth and candour.

"This has been the big problem for Japan. I am sure that the Foreign Ministry, and Aso in particular, is hoping this will be a one-off placate-the-critics-forever move," Professor Underwood said. "I would hope that it wouldn't be like that."

"If the ambassadors are going to attend that, they should do so with the determination to make this the first step."