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Japan's PM hopeful fails to acknowledge family use of slave labour

POWs say they were made to work 15 hours a day for no pay

Justin McCurry in Tokyo
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*Aso was president of Aso Cement from 1973 to 1979.
Photograph: Yoshikazu Tsuno/AFP/Getty Images*

Taro Aso, who is likely to be installed as Japan's new prime minister next week, today refused to acknowledge the use of hundreds of allied prisoners of war by his family's coal mining business during the second world war.

Aso, a former foreign minister who is widely expected to be elected leader of the ruling Liberal Democratic party [LDP] on Monday, would not comment directly on Aso Mining's use of an estimated 10,000 Korean forced labourers and 300 allied POWs at its Yoshikuma pit in Kyushu, south-western Japan.

"I was only five years old when the war ended so I honestly have no personal recollection of that time," Aso, 67, told reporters in Tokyo.

Aso, who served as president of an Aso Mining's successor, Aso Cement, from 1973 to 1979, added: "Aso Cement was a separate company, so I have never regarded this as an issue.

"My responsibility as a politician has been to help rebuild postwar Japan and turn it into a responsible member of the international community."

His comments are likely to anger surviving POWs, who have never received an apology or compensation from the firm, despite evidence unearthed by historians that they were made to work underground for up to 15 hours a day, seven days a week, without pay.

In a document submitted on the orders of the occupation authorities on January 24 1946, Aso Mining admitted it had employed 300 POWs - 101 British, 197 Australian and two Dutch - from May 1945 until the end of the war, but said they had received wages and been fairly treated.

Since then the company, which was run during the war by Aso's father, Takakichi, has never publicly acknowledged the use of POW labourers, and a 100-year history of the company published in 1975 makes no mention of them.

"Aso's refusal to acknowledge his family's use of slave labour proves just how out of step Japan is with the global trend towards recognising historical wrongs and making reparations," **William Underwood**, an expert on forced labour in wartime Japan, told the Guardian.

The domestic media routinely ignores Aso's family connections to wartime slave labour. The firm, now called the Aso Group, is run by Aso's younger brother, Yutaka. In 2001 it entered a joint venture with the French firm Lafarge Cement.

"If this had happened in any country except Japan there would be a domestic consciousness of the problem," Underwood said.

"Aso repeatedly says he has no personal recollection of the war's end, but he was president of the successor to Aso Mining. He has airbrushed the POWs out of history. Where is the corporate social responsibility?"

Aso, a rightwing populist, is expected to win a landslide victory when LDP MPs and local chapters members choose a new leader on Monday. The winner is practically assured of becoming prime minister when the LDP-dominated lower house resumes two days later.