



Japan's PM haunted by family's wartime past

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By Jon Herskovitz

SEOUL (Reuters) - His hair turned-white, his aged eyes clouded-over, Roh Won-baek recalls the years during World War Two when he toiled in a coal mine owned by Japanese Prime Minister Taro Aso's family.

"Many died and got injured while working. I'm here alive and talking, but that's just because I was lucky enough to survive the close calls," said Roh, who was among more than 10,000 Koreans forced to work in the Aso family mine from 1939-1945.

Aso, who became Japan's prime minister in September, was only a child during World War Two when his family's mining company used Korean forced laborers rounded up by the Japanese army.

Nevertheless, despite the circumstances and the passage of time, many Koreans are galled by Aso's past.

This is especially so at a time when relations between the two countries have been uneasy due to a territorial dispute over a desolate set of islands that hark back to Japan's 1910-1945 occupation of the Korean peninsula, and a furor over textbooks that Koreans say gloss over Japan's militaristic past.

"Aso's family history might be hard to swallow for some, and could be brought up if other irritants in South Korea-Japan relations come to the surface," said Park Hong-young, a political science professor at Chungbuk University. Japan's actions in Korea, including its use of forced labor, making women work as prostitutes at frontline brothels for its troops, and property confiscations during its occupation of the Korean peninsula still weigh on Korea's relations with Japan more than 60 years after the war.

PROBLEMATIC FIGURE

Clouded by his family's wartime past, Aso, a staunch nationalist, is a problematic figure for

Koreans, and analysts say his words and actions will be closely watched.

This may be especially so in light of comments he made in 2003 when he triggered a furor in the two Koreas with remarks seen as praising Japan's colonization of the peninsula.

Analysts believe that as prime minister, Aso will try to avoid inflaming relations with South Korea, China and other countries that also suffered under the yoke of Japanese occupation.

"I do not expect the issue concerning Aso mines would be raised as a diplomatic agenda between South Korea and Japan," said Lee Moun-woo, an expert on Korean-Japanese relations.

Lee said that South Koreans would pay close attention to the way Aso addresses Japan's wartime legacy. Koreans often accuse Japanese leaders of failing to show sufficient contrition for Japan's actions during World War Two.

Shortly after taking office, Aso publicly stood by a landmark government apology made in 1995 for wartime actions. He has also hinted that he would avoid visits to Tokyo's Yasukuni shrine for war dead, seen in Beijing and Seoul as a symbol of Japan's past military aggression.

The scion of an elite political family involved in charting Japan's post-war recovery, Aso has distanced himself from his family's dark wartime past.

"I was five or six at the end of World War Two and as an individual, frankly, I have no recollection at all," Aso said in response to a question on Allied prisoners-of-war that were also forced to work in his family's mines.

A South Korean government panel investigating the use of Korean forced laborers during the war, however, has drawn a direct link between Aso and the company that made him wealthy.

"Because the coal mines were a part of the family business, it should be understood that he has a very close relationship to the mines," South Korea's Truth Commission on Forced Mobilisation Under Japanese Imperialism said in a report in September, a copy of which was obtained by Reuters.

Japan's foreign ministry has tried to counter perceptions that Aso's premiership would be bad for ties with Asian countries, especially China and South Korea.

"As Japanese foreign minister, Mr. Aso strengthened Japan's equal partnerships with China and South Korea," Japanese foreign ministry spokesman Kazuo Kodama wrote in a recent rebuttal to a New York Times editorial.

FIGHTING FOR COMPENSATION

For decades, many among the hundreds of thousands of Koreans forced to work for the Japanese as laborers, troops and sex slaves have fought for back wages and other compensation.

Japanese courts have been reluctant to side with them, arguing that Tokyo has signed formal treaties and paid due compensation, or the statute of limitations had expired, or that the company hiring the conscripted labor no longer existed.

Aso Mining has all but disintegrated. As it faded, other companies from the Aso Group rose to prominence such as Aso Cement, which was run by Taro Aso from May 1973 to December 1979, according to his official biography. In 2004, the company changed its name to Lafarge Aso Cement following a joint venture with a French firm.

In 2005, when Aso was foreign minister, a South Korean government commission looking into forced labor said Japan had handed over little in the way of documents and asked Tokyo to provide it with data on more than 100 firms suspected of using conscripted labor, including the Aso family mine.

The commission said that, despite its requests, the Japanese government has provided almost no documents on forced labor and nothing about the Aso mining firm.

The Japanese embassy in Seoul, in response to questions from Reuters on the matter, said: "The Japanese government will make our best efforts to cooperate as much as we can."

The Japanese government has turned over information collected by private businesses, local governments and religious groups to South Korea but it cannot name the companies that have cooperated, the embassy added.

William Underwood, a historian specializing in forced labor, said the Aso family mine had a reputation for brutality and a high rate of runaway forced laborers compared to other mines.

Documents from the time, historians and those who worked in the mines said many laborers died from lack of food, beatings and overwork.

"Just as Aso (Mining) during the war had the reputation as being one of the hardest companies to work for, Aso Cement during this truth commission process had the reputation as being one of the least forthcoming," Underwood said.

Former miner Roh agrees. He went to work in the Aso family mine willingly in 1941 after seeing a

recruiting poster in Korea and thought this was a way to escape poverty at home.

He had a two-year contract and once it was up, he was not allowed to leave the mines. He tried to escape because of the life-threatening conditions but was caught and sent back.

His body scarred and stained by work in the mines, Roh feels he is part of a fading chapter in history.

"Dead men tell no tales and no one cares anymore whether I'm angry or not," Roh said.

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Former coal miner Roh Won-baek speaks during an interview with Reuters in Seoul September 24, 2008. Roh is one of more than 10,000 Koreans forced into labour in brutal conditions more than 60 years ago by Aso Mining, the company run by the family of new Japanese Prime Minister Taro Aso that is also at the centre of a simmering historical fight between Seoul and Tokyo. REUTERS/Lee Jae-Won



Japanese Prime Minister Taro Aso speaks at his official residence in Tokyo in this September 24, 2008 file photo. REUTERS/Toru Hanai