

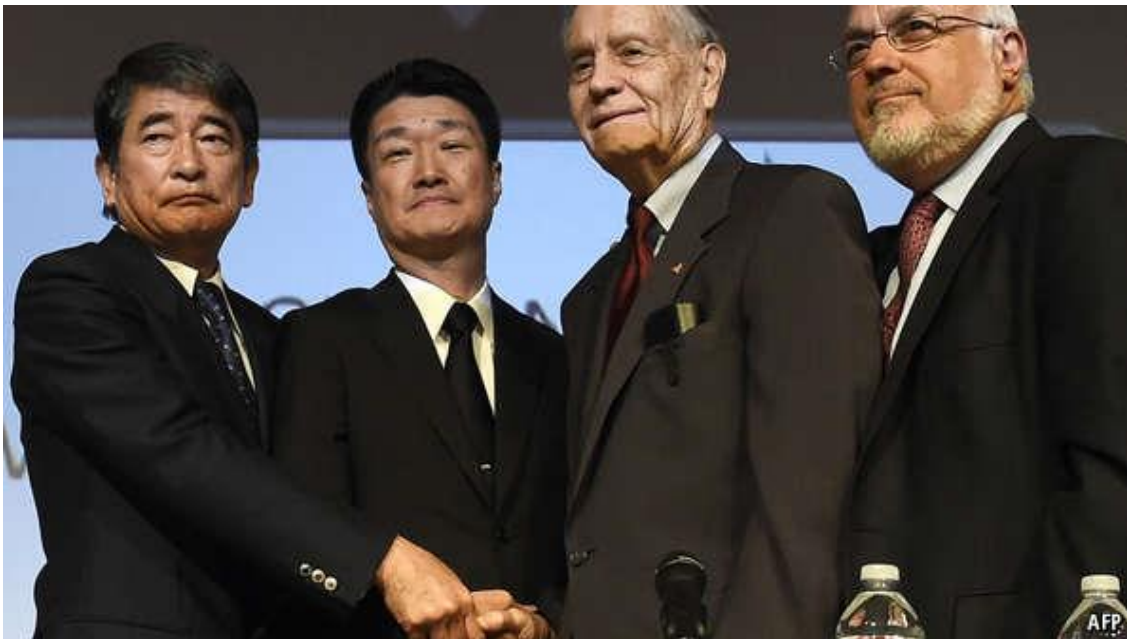
<http://www.economist.com/news/asia/21659467-former-american-prisoners-war-receive-apology-mitsubishi-mitsubishi-shows-wartime-remorse>

Japanese firms and their wartime crimes

Mitsubishi shows some remorse

Former American prisoners of war receive an apology from Mitsubishi

Jul 20th 2015 | TOKYO | Asia



JAMES MURPHY, a 94-year-old American, said that the apology was humbling and sincere. It was long in coming. Mr Murphy (pictured) was forced to work in copper mines run by Mitsubishi Materials from 1944 to 1945. On July 19th the Japanese firm, an affiliate of the Mitsubishi group, a conglomerate, became the first to say sorry formally for its treatment of American prisoners during the second world war. It made its apology during a ceremony in Los Angeles, at the Simon Wiesenthal Center's Museum of Tolerance.

Mr Murphy, who accepted the apology, was one of 30,000 Allied prisoners in wartime Japan. About one in ten of them died, says Kinue Tokudome, executive director of the US-Japan Dialogue on POWs, a non-profit group that helped orchestrate this latest reconciliation. Thousands were shipped to Japan from its overseas colonies from early 1942 to help deal with a shortage of labour.

Hikaru Kimura, a senior Mitsubishi executive, offered the “remorseful apology” to all prisoners forced to work for Mitsubishi Mining. Yukio Okamoto, an outside board member of Mitsubishi and a former advisor on history issues to Shinzo Abe, Japan’s conservative prime minister, expressed regret that it had taken so long. It was an acknowledgment that most of the ex-prisoners are dead—Mr Murphy was the only one fit enough to attend the event.

Japan’s government officially apologised in 2009 and 2010 for the “inhumane treatment” of American and other prisoners (without specifying whom) by Japan’s imperial army. But that mea culpa did not include any admission by the private companies that had forced them to work, and was criticised by some ex-prisoners as hollow.

Mitsubishi and other Japanese companies are aware that wartime compensation claims could flare up at any moment, says Mindy Kotler, director of Asia Policy Point, a Washington-based think-tank. She cites the case of SNCF, the state-owned French rail company, which was dragged into a decades-old controversy over trains used to transport Jews to Nazi concentration camps. Last year the French government agreed to pay \$60m to settle the dispute.

The timing of the Mitsubishi apology has puzzled analysts, however. One motive could be strategic, says **William Underwood**, a historian of Japanese wartime labour issues. Japan’s government is unhappy that South Korea played hardball recently in negotiations over a UNESCO World Heritage bid for early Japanese industrial sites. This month Japan yielded to demands that it admit Koreans had been forced to labour there. Mitsubishi’s admission is likely to upset the South Koreans, who have been fighting for a corporate apology, and strengthen Japan’s alliance with America against China, where several compensation cases relating to forced labour are pending.

Mitsubishi’s apology comes ahead of a much-anticipated statement by Mr Abe on the 70th anniversary of Japan’s surrender, on August 15th. Mr Abe is under pressure to deal with lingering resentments over the war and Japan’s colonial rule in Asia. During a visit to Washington in April, he became the first Japanese leader to address a joint session of America’s Congress in a speech that expressed remorse for the war but stopped short of an apology.

Ms Tokudome hopes the prime minister will avoid watering down previous apologies for the war in August and respond to thawing ties with China and South Korea. But saying sorry to a close ally is easier than doing so to estranged neighbours. Tomohiko Taniguchi, a special advisor to Mr Abe’s cabinet, is sceptical that “rampant nationalism” in those countries can be tamed anyway. Hatred of Japan, he says, has been “engraved” in the South Korean and Chinese psyches.