

Japan Focus

US Congressional Resolution Calls on Japan to Accept Responsibility for Wartime Comfort Women

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By Alexis Dudden, with H.R. 759

Two members of the United States Congress, Representative Lane Evans (D-Illinois) and Representative Chris Smith (R-New Jersey), have introduced a non-binding resolution (H.Res. 759) in the current congressional session which calls on the government of Japan to "formally acknowledge and accept responsibility for its sexual enslavement of young women" during the 1930s and 40s.

In the 1930s, as it expanded into China, the Japanese military colluded with the government to establish what were called, "Comfort Stations." Such stations provided Japanese soldiers paid sex with women (and it appears in some instances men and boys, too) from all areas under Japanese control, but especially Korea and China. These women and girls were called "comfort women." The system grew along with Japan's war effort, extending throughout Southeast Asia and the Pacific. Since the late 1980s when some of these women were able to speak publicly for the first time, however, it has become widely recognized that there was nothing voluntary in their service to the Japanese soldiers, and that most of the estimated 50,000 to 200,000 women who were part of this system had been kidnapped or tricked into their involvement. The largest number of women—including girls as young as 12 years old—were Korean, while many others were Chinese, Taiwanese, Filipino, Indonesian, and Dutch.

Throughout the 1990s the issue was a major regional and international topic, culminating in the 2000 Tokyo Women's Tribunal and a controversial NHK TV documentary. The Japanese government, refusing to accept direct responsibility for the victimization of the comfort women, nevertheless established and administered a "private" Comfort Women Fund that paid some of the women \$20,000 each. Most of the surviving comfort women, however, particularly those in Korea, refused to accept payment from a non-government entity. It remains a crucial part of Japan's ongoing problems over coming to terms with its history and settling its wartime debts to its Asian neighbors.



A protest by former comfort women

This is not the first such bill introduced in the House, including previous efforts on behalf of American POWs. None have been successful. Importantly, however, this time the bill has bipartisan sponsorship from its inception. Perhaps even more importantly, there are some subtle—yet powerful—changes in the language used in this attempt: with an eye to the fact that the San Francisco Treaty protected Japan from demands for compensation from victim nations, a position supported by the US State Department ever since, the compensation question has been put aside in favor of more strategically deployed terminology.

In contrast with prior efforts urging the Japanese government to apologize for its wartime behavior, this bill focuses on the issue of "responsibility." Also, it notices the repeated denials that Japanese officials have made and continue to make concerning not only the issue of sexual slavery but other wartime atrocities as well. In short, the authors of this bill are well aware that the government of Japan has repeatedly issued pro forma apologies during the past decade, but that these apologies themselves remain suspect because of contrary actions and statements by Japan's elected and appointed officials.

Several Washington observers note that some critical behind-the-scenes support for the bill stems from the growing importance of the Chinese-American and Korean-American lobbies and give credit to their efforts for keeping this sentiment alive. These are groups that have followed closely the rejection by Japanese courts of repeated suits seeking compensation for unpaid wartime forced labor from corporations such as Mitsubishi and Mitsui, as well as from the Japanese government. Others notice that key members of the House Committee on International Relations such as Henry Hyde (R-Illinois) are soon retiring, and that they are determined to bring some measure of recognition to the horrors they and their fellow WWII veterans endured during their service in the Pacific theater. Mindy Kotler of Asia Policy Point notices that the bill's mention of Amnesty International and the United Nations reveals a more "global" awareness of the issues involved, and that the new phrasing goes beyond the issue of sexual slavery and "is directed at larger issues of US-Japan alliance management as well."

The key UN documents submitted by special rapporteurs for human rights have been the 1996 Coomaraswamy Report and the 1998 McDougall Report, both accessible—along with a similarly scathing report by the Geneva-based International Commissions of Jurists—at the [website](#) of the Washington Coalition for Comfort Women Issues. Released after establishment of the Asian Women's Fund, which essentially represented a damage-control approach by the Japanese government to accountability for sexual slavery, the McDougall Report concluded by finding that "anything less than full and unqualified acceptance by the Government of Japan of legal liability

and the consequences that flow from such liability is wholly inadequate.” Japan failed to accept this liability in the wake of these damning UN documents, as explained by a Japanese [attorney](#) and comfort women’s advocate.

Another important example of the global consensus that Japan needs to do much more to settle the comfort women and other forced labor issues is provided by the International Labor Organization. Since 1996, the ILO’s highly regarded Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations (CEACR) has on a near-annual basis issued “individual observations” finding that imperial Japan committed systematic violations of the Forced Labor Convention of 1930—and urging modern Japan to correct the transgressions. The ILO committee’s earlier reports centered on military sexual slavery and industrial labor conscription; more recently the issue of Chinese forced labor in wartime Japan has come to the fore. The CEACR’s 2003 [report](#) describes support for redress among trade union confederations in Japan and [South Korea](#), along with Japanese government positions that the committee finds unpersuasive. Tokyo, despite having ratified the Forced Labor Convention in 1932, continues to request that the ILO stop delving into its wartime past.

Japan Focus will be following the development of this bill and welcomes comments, information and contributions from our readers on the history, implications and possible futures of the initiative. See the following Japan Focus articles introducing the issues of wartime forced labor: Tessa Morris-Suzuki, [Free Speech – Silenced Voices: The Japanese Media, the Comfort Women Tribunal, and the NHK Affair](#), Yoshiko Nozaki, [The “Comfort Women” Controversy: History and Testimony](#); and Alexis Dudden, [The End of Apology](#).



Artwork by a former comfort woman

H.Res. 759, 109th Congress, 2d Session.

In the House of Representatives April 4, 2006

Mr. EVANS (for himself and Mr. SMITH of New Jersey) submitted the following resolution, which was referred to the Committee on International Relations

Status: Referred to the House Committee on International Relations.

RESOLUTION

Expressing the sense of the House of Representatives that the Government of Japan should formally acknowledge and accept responsibility for its sexual enslavement of young women, known to the world as 'comfort women', during its colonial occupation of Asia and the Pacific Islands from the 1930s through the duration of World War II, and for other purposes.

Whereas the Government of Japan, during its colonial occupation of Asia and the Pacific Islands from the 1930s through the duration of World War II, organized the subjugation and kidnapping, for the sole purpose of sexual servitude, of young women, who became known to the world as 'comfort women';

Whereas the 'comfort women' tragedy was one of the largest cases of human trafficking in the 20th century;

Whereas the enslavement of comfort women was officially commissioned and orchestrated by the Government of Japan to include gang rape, forced abortions, sexual violence, human trafficking, and numerous other crimes against humanity;

Whereas the comfort women included girls as young as 13 years of age and women separated from their own children;

Whereas the comfort women were either abducted from their homes or lured into sexual servitude under false pretenses;

Whereas many comfort women were eventually killed or driven to commit suicide when the hostilities ceased;

Whereas the use of 'comfort women' is considered a current as well as past human rights issue;

Whereas the shame connected to their ordeal caused many comfort women to conceal it and caused many others to come forward about their experiences only in recent years;

Whereas historians conclude that as many as 200,000 women were enslaved, but very few of them survive today;

Whereas the Government of Japan did not fully disclose these war crimes during negotiations for reparations with its former enemies and occupied countries;

Whereas some textbooks used in Japanese schools minimize the 'comfort women' tragedy and other atrocities, and distort the Japanese role in war crimes during World War II; and

Whereas Japanese Government officials, both elected and career, as recently as June 2005, praised the removal of the term 'comfort women' from Japanese textbooks: Now, therefore, be it *Resolved*, That it is the sense of the House of Representatives that the Government of Japan--

- (1) should formally acknowledge and accept responsibility for its sexual enslavement of young women, known to the world as 'comfort women', during its colonial occupation of Asia and the Pacific Islands from the 1930s through the duration of World War II;
- (2) should educate current and future generations about this horrible crime against humanity;
- (3) should publicly, strongly, and repeatedly refute any claims that the subjugation and enslavement of comfort women never occurred; and
- (4) should follow the recommendations of the United Nations and Amnesty International with respect to the 'comfort women'.



A truckload of comfort women during the Pacific War

Supplementary Information on previous resolutions:

June 25, 2000 – A resolution ordering Japan to apologize and compensate victims of war crimes committed during World War II has been proposed to the U.S. House of Representatives. The resolution includes measures for comfort women, Korean women forced into providing sex to the Japanese Army. Congressman Lane Evans-13th District Illinois (Democrat) submitted the resolution to the International Relations Committee on June 19 for consideration during the 106th Congress in September. This resolution is the second of its kind, following one submitted by Congressman William Lipinski-3rd District Illinois (Democrat) in July 1997. The resolution was passed on to the International Relations Committee's Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific, but was later scrapped when congressmen delayed resolutions, fearing damage to relations with Japan.

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