

Press Release

Statement concerning the IAC review for the UNESCO's Memory of the World Register

Towards the “Culture of Memory”, not the “Culture of Oblivion”

Some media reports claim that the UNESCO's International Advisory Committee (IAC) for the Memory of the World Register has effectively excluded the collection of documents on the issue of Japan's military sexual slavery system of so-called “comfort women” (submitted as: “Voices of Comfort Women”) from the 2017 registration for the UNESCO's Memory of the World Register by postponing the committee's decision whether or not to include those documents.

This set of documents was nominated jointly on 31 May 2016 by the “International Solidarity Committee”, consisting of civic groups from eight different countries and regions, and the Imperial War Museum of the UK. The news has been a complete surprise for us since our understanding has been that the results of the IAC's review session held between 24th to 27th October 2017 in Paris are closed in principle, and that the results would be officially notified only when the decision is signed by the UNESCO Director General after the session. We are informed that as many as 125 sets of documents were nominated for the Memory of the World Register in 2016, but need to wait for the official explanation as to why the “Voices of Comfort Women” has been excluded.

Reports indicate that the strong opposition of the government of Japan to the registration of the “Voices of Comfort Women” has seen it take the extreme measure of suspending the payment of its UNESCO contribution in order to have amendments made to the rules of the Memory of the World Register. If UNESCO did in fact give in to such pressure and exclude our nomination from its review by applying rules which have not yet been officially open to the public, let alone exist at the time of our nomination in 2016, then we can only express our regret. This regret applies not only to the exclusion itself but also to the extremely unusual process undertaken which is a significant divergence from official procedures.

It is not the aim of UNESCO's Memory of the World Register programme to make judgements related to history. The programme considers documents to be as important heritage items for the human race as what is found in nature or among architecture, and aims at preserving and enabling wider access to records that are important for the world. Inspired by this vision and hoping to ensure the handing down to future generations of important records that record the “voices” of women put into Japan's military sexual slavery, supporters in Japan of the survivors in different parts of Asia organized a Japan committee in August 2015 in order to join with the International Solidarity Committee in applying for registration.

The content of the “Voices of Comfort Women” nominated for the Memory of the World Register includes records of interviews with survivors of Japan's military sexual slavery, records of their struggle for justice, and a collection of documents that establishes the facts of Japan's military sexual slavery system. We believe that this set of records is of universal value concerning women's human rights. While inclusion or otherwise in the UNESCO Memory of the World Register will have

no influence over our determination to preserve these records, registration this year would have guaranteed their preservation as materials valuable for the world. In addition, the few remaining women survivors would have been assured that their ordeal was not in vain even long after they are finally gone. In this sense, we have no words to express the depth of our regret concerning this year's decision, since registration would also have served a significant role in the rehabilitation of these women.

The role of UNESCO is clearly stipulated in its Constitution. Article I reads:

“The purpose of the Organization is to contribute to peace and security by promoting collaboration among the nations through education, science and culture in order to further universal respect for justice, for the rule of law and for the human rights and fundamental freedoms which are affirmed for the peoples of the world, without distinction of race, sex, language or religion, by the Charter of the United Nations.”

With respect to the events concerning the “Voices of Comfort Women” and UNESCO Memory of the World Register, we wish to put on record that it is not UNESCO or IAC that has been working against this purpose. It is the government of Japan which has in fact acted contrary to UNESCO's aims to “further universal respect for justice, for the rule of law and for the human rights and fundamental freedoms” by interfering in the organization's processes and opposing the registration of “Voices of Comfort Women” documents.

The government of Japan has consistently declined to confront both the crimes committed by Japanese troops during the Asia-Pacific War and its own crimes against humanity including its military sexual slavery. The Japanese state has never accepted that what was done to the women involved was in fact a human rights violation.

When facing defeat in 1945, the Imperial Japan destroyed numerous military and government documents for the fear of war crimes prosecution. While the long awaited Public Records Management Act was finally put in force in Japan in 2011, the so-called Secrets Protection Act of 2013 watered the 2011 bill down and effectively prevented it serving its purpose. Moreover, the National Archives of Japan has no authority to manage official documents held by governmental bodies other than themselves. Since the government of Japan fatally lacks the understanding that records and archives are a basis for democracy, this government can contribute nothing to any revision of the rules of the UNESCO Memory of the World Registry which upholds the value of documentary heritage.

What the government of Japan seeks is oblivion. To counter the “culture of oblivion”, “dialogue” has little role to play. Rather, in responding to the “culture of oblivion“, the role to play expected of the global community, and the UNESCO Memory of the World Register in particular, is nothing other than pushing it back and building a “culture of memory”. We earnestly hope that UNESCO and the experts of its Memory of the World Register will act to achieve the goal stipulated in the UNESCO Constitution.

October 27, 2017

The Japanese Committee for Joint Nomination to the UNESCO MoW Register

Member Organizations of the Japanese Committee for Joint Nomination to the UNESCO MoW Register

- Support Group for the Lawsuit of Korean Former “Comfort Women” Resident of Japan
- Group for uncovering the facts of Japanese military's sexual violence in Shanxi (China) and acting in solidarity with the Grandmas
- Support Group for Taiwanese Survivors of Japan's Military Sexual Slavery
- Association to Support Chinese “Comfort Women” lawsuits
- Japanese Committee for Filipino “Comfort Women”
- Women's Active Museum on War and Peace (WAM)

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