

Bridge the political ‘agreement’ to the true ‘resolution’

On December 28th 2015, an announcement was made that the foreign ministers of the Republic of Korea(ROK) and Japan reached an agreement to finally resolve the issue of Japan’s military sexual slavery during the meeting they held that day. The content of the agreement between the two countries is far from satisfactory by international standards as measures to redress the sufferings of women upon whom extreme sexual violence was inflicted in armed conflicts. It must be said that the Japanese government has not learned through the process of ‘Asian Women’s Fund’ that pushing a political agreement in the absence of the victims and forcing them to make a painful choice in itself is a violent act.

Women’s Active Museum on War and Peace (wam) has been acting to tell the historical fact of the system of Japan’s military sexual slavery to future generations in order not to repeat the same mistake again and to form a peaceful society without violence against women. WAM has also been involved with the projects to discuss with the survivors and their supporting groups in the Asia Pacific region to find reparation measures and to consolidate them as concrete recommendations that would be acceptable to all the survivors while as many as possible of them are still alive. For those who have closely watched the figures of aging survivors who in spite of their desire to set their mind at rest feel compelled to continuously speak out, a wish to see ‘a resolution’ in a way that can be accepted by the survivors is an earnest one. For that very reason, we cannot contain our anger against both governments of ROK and Japan to reach a political ‘agreement’ in the absence of the victim.

At the same time, the foolish promise between the governments of ROK and Japan to ‘agree finally and irreversibly’ without listening to the voice of the survivors under the pressure of the USA, who places the utmost importance on the security policies, makes it extremely difficult for the government of ROK to have diplomatic negotiations with the government of Japan. It is our wish to somehow link the deep anger and disappointment felt among the survivors with hope. It is our wish to carefully search for a way to bridge the political ‘agreement’ between the governments of ROK and Japan to ‘a resolution’ acceptable to the survivors, even though the search may take time.

The following are the recommendations of measures upon the agreement between the governments of ROK and Japan, the measures that the Japanese government should take and that can be realistically achieved from now on. It must be added that the recommendations are made without the consultation with the survivors and therefore there is a possibility that the demands of the survivors could be more rigorous and that a decision could be made to deny the agreement itself.

1. Acknowledgement of responsibilities

In the recent agreement, the Japanese government stated that it ‘is painfully aware of responsibilities’ and we candidly value its clear acknowledgement of the state responsibilities towards the women who were forced to become ‘comfort women’ for the Japanese military. Although the acknowledgement came much too late, the total acknowledgement by the government of its responsibilities without using any of those thoughtless epithets such as ‘moral’ or ‘humanitarian’ represents an important premise in developing the measures from now on. On the other hand, the media, including the public broadcaster, reports an erroneous interpretation that its ‘responsibilities’ ‘mean moral responsibilities’ and such an interpretation would render the effort of the governments meaningless.

Recommendation 1: The government of Japan should oppose the reports which limit its responsibilities as ‘moral’ and should repeatedly express that it painfully acknowledges its ‘responsibilities’ which are no more or no less.

2. Apologies

We value the fact that Prime Minister Abe, as the prime minister of Japan, expressed his apologies and remorse. It was, however, formulated as an announcement ‘by proxy’ when the foreign minister

Kishida read Prime Minister Abe's apologies and then a phone call from Prime Minister Abe to President Park Geun-hye to convey his apologies. Such a form cannot possibly be accepted as formal apologies that the survivors have been demanding. As a form of apologies by the state for its human rights violation, it is far from sufficient compared to the forms of apologies in Europe or in the United States, for example the way in which the US government apologized to the Japanese Americans who had suffered in Internment camps during WWII.

Recommendation 2: The apologies and remorse of the prime minister must be directly communicated from Prime Minister Abe to the survivors in either an oral or written form.

3. Acknowledgement of facts

The biggest problem of this agreement is that it did not go beyond the expression of 'with the involvement of the military authorities', which is as ambiguous as was 'the Kono Statement'. In order to offer reparation for damages in the form that the survivors have been seeking, it is imperative to clearly acknowledge the facts concerning the system of Japan's military sexual slavery in a way that leaves no ambiguity. As has already been sufficiently revealed by official documents and other evidence, the 'comfort stations' were a part of military rear facilities which the Japanese military of the day planned, systematically controlled and operated. The system of Japan's military sexual slavery not only inflicted injuries to the honor and dignity of women but was a serious criminal offence that violated the human rights of the women, as women were taken against their will and were forced to engage in sexual acts in a coercive environment.

Recommendation 3: In order to clarify in which acts the government of Japan 'is painfully aware of responsibilities' and expresses 'apologies and remorse', it must not only explicitly state its intention to observe 'the Kono Statement' that acknowledged the fact that women were taken against their will but also must acknowledge the fact that 'comfort stations' were established primarily by the Japanese military and that such act constitutes violation of human rights.

4. Payment to the fund to be established by ROK

Opinions are divided in evaluations of the plan under which payment to the fund that the government of ROK will establish comes directly from the national treasury of the Japanese government. As the fund is established by the government of ROK and thus is differentiated from the Asian Women's Fund although it still takes the form of a fund, we think that there is a chance that the money that comes from the Japanese national treasury upon its 'painful' acknowledgement of its 'responsibilities' could be considered as 'an evidence of apologies' from the government of Japan even though the term compensation is not mentioned.

Recommendation 4: In order to ensure that the projects financed by the fund to be established by ROK would be acceptable to the survivors, the government of Japan must explicitly state that the payment is made as 'a proof of apologies (or of saying sorry)' at the time when it makes the payment. Furthermore, the management of the fund that aims 'to recover honor and dignity and to heal the psychological wounds' must be conducted upon full consultation with the survivors and their supporting groups. The government of Japan must not make any demands against the intentions of the survivors concerning the projects of the fund, in view of the aim of such projects being to heal the wounds of the survivors. It is the Japanese government's obligation to its tax payers to ensure 1 billion yen of the tax money will be led into 'a resolution'

5. On the peace monument and transmission of memory

The most offensive to the survivors in this political agreement was the attitude of the government of Japan who requested removal of the 'peace monument' in front of the embassy of Japan in Seoul. If the Japanese government's expression of their wish to heal the psychological wounds of the survivors comes from genuine intentions, what is required would be nothing other than such an act as laying flowers before the monument. 'The peace monument' was built by the citizens including 'comfort women' survivors and as such a request of its removal should never have been included in the agreement negotiations, nor should the government of ROK, who has sought 'measures acceptable to the survivors', take any step toward its removal.

Recommendation 5: The governments of ROK and Japan must understand that ‘the peace monument’ in front of the embassy of Japan in Seoul as well as other monuments built in the US and elsewhere are a global expression of the activities of the citizens who seek to eradicate sexual violence in armed conflicts and to restore the sense of honor and dignity of the survivors. Furthermore, the government of Japan must refrain from any act opposing such monuments in order to show their will to hand over the negative history of Japan to future generations.

6. Accounting of the truth, education and refutation against denials

Nothing was mentioned in the recent agreement about the search for true facts or the transmission of historical facts through education. However, the most important as well as integral element of the restoration of honor and dignity of the survivors which the survivors themselves feel is to transmit the historical facts as a lesson so that no similar suffering such as theirs should be repeated on anyone.

Recommendation 6: The government of Japan must do the following: disclose all documents possessed by the government of Japan, conduct further research of documents both in Japan and internationally, make further inquiries into facts including interviews of the survivors and other related persons both in Japan and internationally, promote school and social education including references in textbooks used in compulsory education. Furthermore, the government of Japan must resolutely refute the utterances of any public figure who denies the historical facts or the responsibility of the State of Japan.

7. On approaches toward the international community including the UN

The fact that both governments of the ROK and Japan announced that they are to mutually ‘refrain from accusing or criticizing each other regarding this issue in the international community including at the United Nations’ reveals that neither government recognizes this issue of Japan’s military sexual slavery as a global issue of women’s human rights. To seek redress is a natural right of survivors who suffered grievous violation of their human rights by the Japanese military, including the survivors in ROK. Unless the government of Japan makes sincere responses, it should understand that demands from the international community will continue to be made. Among other things, the project to register the records concerning Japan’s military sexual slavery with the UNESCO Memory of the World Programme ought to be a project with which the government of Japan should take initiative as a significant world heritage worthy of protection, as such records would tell the life stories of women who survived the sexual violence inflicted by military forces in armed conflict.

Recommendation 7: The government of Japan must sincerely accept the recommendations by UN human rights bodies and it must not hinder the efforts among the international community toward reinstating human rights of women and consolidating the memories of the history of the system of Japan’s military sexual slavery.

Whether it is possible to bridge the recent political ‘agreement’ with the final ‘resolution’ depends on the actions that the government of Japan takes from here. The survivors have been forced to live a difficult life for as long as seventy years after the war because they were made Japan’s military sex slaves. We do not spare any effort so that the survivors at long last could live the remainder of their lives with a sense of relief and tranquility. We also urge similar measures be taken to give reparation to the survivors in other parts of the Asia and Pacific region, who must be anxious to see what will result from the agreement between the governments of ROK and Japan.

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