

Understanding H. Res. 121
Backgrounder
Asia Policy Point
July 6, 2007

BACKGROUND

Rep Mike Honda (D-CA) introduced H. Res. 121 on January 31, 2006 to restore dignity and honor to victims of a near-forgotten war crime.

It calls on the Government of Japan to formally acknowledge, apologize, and accept historical responsibility in a clear and unequivocal manner for its Imperial Armed Force's coercion of young women into sexual slavery" during the 1930s and World War II as well as refute denials, educate future generations, and follow international recommendations in regard to the Comfort Women.

In the previous Congress, Rep Lane Evans (D-IL) introduced similar legislation, H. Res. 759, which was approved by the House International Relations Committee in September 2006, but never placed on the House docket.

The House Foreign Affairs Committee approved H. Res. 121, 38-2 on June 26. Only Reps Paul (R-TX) and Tancredo (R-CO) voted against. No members questioned the facts describing the situation of the Comfort Women or the legal arguments confirming that the Government of Japan had not issued an official, unequivocal apology.

On the same day, House Speaker Pelosi issued a press release strongly supporting the Resolution, saying "I look forward to the House of Representatives passing this resolution and sending a strong message that we will not forget the horrors endured by the comfort women. They have waited far too long, but it is not too late to recognize their courage."

As of July 6, 2007, there were 152 bi-partisan, co-sponsors of the resolution. Both Rep Lantos (D-CA) Chair and Rep Ros-Lehtinen, Minority Chair of the House Foreign Affairs Committee are co-sponsors.

FACTS

The Victims

Possibly as many as 200,000 girls and women (some boys as well).

Majority from Korea, others from Japan, Taiwan, China, the Philippines, Indonesia, Vietnam, and the rest of Southeast Asia and the Pacific. Western women, primarily Dutch, who were POWs were also made Comfort Women.

Japanese women were generally prostitutes; Korean women generally procured by unscrupulous middlemen; other Asian women were generally spoils of war; and the Dutch women were “selected” from POW camps in the Dutch East Indies (Indonesia).

Most of the girls were teenagers, some as young as 12, as virgins and young women were preferred as being free of venereal diseases.

Imperial Japan’s System

In the early 1930s, the Imperial Army and Navy established the Comfort Women system to cut crime and disease among their forces in China.

As conflict and war grew in Asia, so did the complexity of the system. By late 1938, the CW system became well-interlocked with the Japanese military system.

Japan’s War Ministry with the help of the Foreign Ministry, Home Affairs Ministry, and colonial administrations of China and Korea, created and developed a policy to maintain, administer, and sanction Comfort Stations as a military strategy to increase the efficiency and morale of Imperial Japanese Forces.

This policy included the issuance of detailed instructions for construction of Comfort Stations, allotments of women, transportation, time spent with the women, fees charged, sanity conditions, as well as actuary tables for how long women of each age would last under certain conditions.

Conditions of the Comfort Women

Most of the women “served” with front line units where they “worked” at night and cooked, cleaned, and sorted ammunition during the day.

All the women were subject to all forms of extreme physical and mental abuse, including beatings, gang rape, forced abortions, torture, mutilation, and drugging. Many were killed after they became diseased or “overworked.”

Comfort women were mentally and physically dehumanized and diminished to the status of a “resource often servicing 36 or more men a day. None were allowed to leave voluntarily.

Survivors

Surviving comfort women suffer many physical and psychological problems. Many committed suicide from the shame and pain.

Many concealed their past to avoid societal condemnation. Only since 1991 have a few survivors dared to come forward and speak out. Most of the Dutch survivors refuse to have their names released.

Less than 300 survivors are known to exist today. They seek justice and simple human dignity.

JAPAN'S EQUIVOCAL APOLOGIES

The Cabinet, Japan's executive authority (not the Prime Minister), has NEVER issued a Cabinet Decision officially confirming an apology to the Comfort Women.

The 1993 Kono Statement, said to be the "official apology" was not approved by the Cabinet and only delivered by the Chief Cabinet Secretary as part of a report finally confirming that the Comfort Women System existed. CW was denied before this.

In the Kono Statement and all subsequent unofficial apologies by prime ministers the language used was very carefully crafted Japanese to show a "sense" of regret as opposed to an apology.

A prime minister's statement—or a chief cabinet minister's statement—not backed by a Cabinet Decision is a proposition or a personal assumption.

The Asian [Comfort] Women's Fund (AWF) established in 1994 was only a quasi-governmental effort. "Atonement payments" from monies raised from private citizens were offered to women in only Korea, Taiwan, and the Philippines. Funds were provided directly to the Indonesian government and to a Dutch NGO. Many women refused to accept the "payments" as they were not governmental, thus not a government acknowledgement of their suffering and an insult.

Today, a majority of the Japanese Cabinet and Diet say publicly that the Comfort Women were compensated, willing prostitutes. Mention of the CW tragedy has all but disappeared from both junior high and high school texts.

On March 1, Prime Minister Abe denied in the Diet that the CW were coerced into prostitution for the military. By "coerced," Abe meant abduction, solely.

Misunderstood by Abe and others in Japan, coercion is the practice of compelling a person to involuntarily behave in a certain way (whether through action or inaction) by use of threats, intimidation, or some other form of pressure or force. Coercion may typically involve the actual infliction of physical or psychological harm in order to enhance the credibility of a threat. This accepted, legal explanation of coercion fits exactly the situation of the Comfort Women.

WHY SUPPORT H. Res 121

As Rep Lantos said at the June 26th mark up

The true strength of a nation is tested when it is forced to confront the darkest chapters in its history. Will it have the courage to face up to the truth of its past, or will it hide from those truths in the desperate and foolish hope they will fade with time? Post-War Germany made the right choice. Japan, on the other hand, has actively promoted historical amnesia. The facts are plain: there can be no denying that the Japanese Imperial military coerced thousands upon thousands of women, primarily Chinese and Koreans, into sexual slavery during the war.

Japan's forthright, simple apology to the Comfort Women would be a positive feature of the U.S.-Alliance. It would demonstrate a deep commitment to historical truth and cooperation. It would remove a lingering, corrosive issue weakening the security ties between Japan and major U.S. allies in the region, namely with South Korea, the Philippines, Singapore, and Australia.

House Resolution 121 addresses a historic injustice that encompasses human rights, women's rights, rule of law, peacemaking, and social justice. Defending and forwarding these values is the purpose of the U.S.-Japan Alliance.

Passing this resolution does not attack Japan. It encourages the government of Japan to extend its own policies and commitments. Passage of H. Res. 121 will indicate a U.S. commitment to the U.S.-Japan alliance's contemporary agenda.

Questions?

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