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Japanese Government Should Give Apology and Compensation To WWII Comfort Women

NEW YORK, August 9, 2005—In advance of the 60th anniversary of the end of World War II, the International Center for Transitional Justice (ICTJ) called on the government of Japan to make an official apology and provide compensation to thousands of women forced into sexual slavery in Japanese-occupied countries between 1932 and 1945.

Women from numerous Asian countries, including China, Indonesia, Japan, North and South Korea, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Taiwan, Thailand, Timor-Leste and Vietnam were forced to serve as so-called “comfort women” for Japanese soldiers throughout the region. Women from the Netherlands living in Indonesia at the time of the Japanese occupation also suffered under this system. Officially regulated sexual slavery was systematized following the invasion of Nanjing, China, in 1937.

Estimates of the number of comfort women range from 50,000 to 200,000. In their enslavement, the women suffered sexual violence, torture, malnutrition, and disease. Surviving victims continue to endure the effects of the physical injuries and mental and emotional trauma inflicted on them by the Japanese military.

Following the discovery of incriminating Imperial Army documents by a Japanese historian in 1992, the Japanese Prime Minister’s Office acknowledged “moral, but not legal” responsibility for the comfort women. The government of Japan still refuses to make an official apology and provide proper compensation. It continues to deny legal responsibility for the system.

Many former comfort women have rejected atonement money offered to them through the Asian Women’s Fund, established by the Japanese government in 1995 with contributions from private sources. The fund is widely seen as a way for the government to evade legal responsibility. Throughout the region, organizations of former comfort women and their supporters have worked to pressure the Japanese government to make an official apology and provide its own compensation.

The International Military Tribunal for the Far East, convened after the war to try suspected Japanese war criminals, did not recognize violations against comfort women as war crimes due reparations. Subsequently, several Asian human rights organizations initiated the Women’s International War Crimes Tribunal on Japan’s Military Sexual

Slavery. This body met in Tokyo in 2000 and in The Hague in 2001 to hold hearings on state and individual responsibility for the abuses perpetrated against comfort women. The Tribunal not only reasserted the responsibility of the Japanese government and military for the comfort women system, but also found that the violations that occurred constituted crimes against humanity under then-applicable law. The findings of this tribunal are consistent with increasing international recognition of states' responsibility to provide reparations for past human rights violations.

Radhika Coomaraswamy, the former UN special rapporteur on violence against women, published an official report on the issue of military sexual slavery by Japan in 1996. "It is unacceptable that the issue of compensation still remains unresolved," Ms. Coomaraswamy stated. "The government of Japan must acknowledge that forcing women into sexual servitude was a crime under international humanitarian law, and must compensate victims appropriately."

Most of the comfort women are now deceased, and those that are still alive are extremely elderly. It is essential that the Japanese government take action now, by providing an official apology and compensation, while surviving victims may still receive justice for the crimes committed against them.

About the ICTJ

The International Center for Transitional Justice (ICTJ) assists countries pursuing accountability for past mass atrocity or human rights abuse. The Center works in societies emerging from repressive rule or armed conflict, as well as in established democracies where historical injustices or systemic abuse remain unresolved.

In order to promote justice, peace, and reconciliation, government officials and nongovernmental advocates are likely to consider a variety of transitional justice approaches including both judicial and nonjudicial responses to human rights crimes. The ICTJ assists in the development of integrated, comprehensive, and localized approaches to transitional justice comprising five key elements: prosecuting perpetrators, documenting and acknowledging violations through nonjudicial means such as truth commissions, reforming abusive institutions, providing reparations to victims, and facilitating reconciliation processes.

The Center is committed to building local capacity and generally strengthening the emerging field of transitional justice, and works closely with organizations and experts around the world to do so. By working in the field through local languages, the ICTJ provides comparative information, legal and policy analysis, documentation, and strategic research to justice and truth-seeking institutions, nongovernmental organizations, governments and others.

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