

Why Has South Korea Still Not Apologized to the Vietnam Comfort Women?

Chris Grasso, Tampa Business Examiner, May 27, 2015

This year, at the 96th anniversary of the Korean uprising against Japan in March 1, 1919, South Korean President Park Geun-hye reiterated her call for Japan to admit to the war crimes it had committed during World War Two. Yet, even as she relentlessly seeks an apology from Japan, Ms. Park has conveniently ignored the fact that during the Vietnam War, Korean troops raped, assaulted and barbarically slaughtered thousands of Vietnam comfort women. Ms. Park cannot escape blame and claim unverified reports. Why South Korea still refuses to apologize to the Vietnam comfort women is not as mysterious as it seems.

Documents from the US National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) show irrefutable proof of South Korea's abuses and wrongdoings during that period. Noriyuki Yamaguchi, then Washington bureau chief of the Tokyo Broadcasting System, mentioned in an article he wrote that in July 2014, the archives revealed a letter from the US military command stationed in Ho Chi Minh City (then Saigon) to Gen. Chae Myeong-sin, the military commander of South Korea in Vietnam. The letter referred to the illegal diversion of US supplies to South Korea, acts of prostitution in a supposedly "welfare center" where Vietnamese women were working, and US troops using that center for a \$38 fee per visit.

The above report is only one of many accounts of South Korea's atrocities towards the Vietnamese people during the war. Elderly survivors have recounted their own horror stories of the sex slavery and massacres they went through at that time. In 2001, recognizing the veracity of the reports, then South Korean President Kim Dae-jung met with Vietnam President Tran Duc Luong and offered a direct apology for South Korea's acts on the Vietnamese people during the war.

But the day after Kim's message of apology, Park Geun-hye, then deputy leader of the Grand National Party, the opposition party at the time, criticized Kim's statement, saying it "drove a stake through the honor of South Korea." Looking back, it was an omen of things to come if she should lead the country someday.

Seventy years and several apologies later, South Korean officials are still pressing Japan over the WW2 comfort women issue. Like an infant fixated on a vendetta, South Korea's sense of entitlement is such that no amount of compensation or apology will satisfy them. Or is it really a simple case of overblown egomania? Old and new historical events might provide clues.

In a case of karmic retribution for South Korea, the Vietnam comfort women issue has been brought to international awareness 40 years after the war ended. To recall, in 1991 Kim Hak-soon was the first Korean comfort woman living in South Korea to give a testimony about her alleged experience under the control of Japanese soldiers. It triggered a barrage of angry reactions against Japan and put the country under scrutiny for the reparation and atonement it should give to its victims. Now it is South Korea facing the very same situation. Long before the Vietnam comfort women came out and identified themselves, they already knew about their own atrocities but, through cunning and clever manipulation, managed to keep it under the radar of the mainstream media.

It took a visit to Vietnam by Yoon Mi-hyang in March to uncover the grim truth about the sex enslavement of Vietnam's women by Korean and American troops. Yoon is president of the Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan, the non-profit organization formed to look into alleged crimes against women in Asia during World War Two, many of whom were Koreans. In 2012, the Council had set up the Butterfly Fund and extended their mission to help other women victims of war. Congo was the first country they identified. Little did they know that in Vietnam, they would find out about the horrors that their own countrymen, the Korean soldiers, had perpetrated.

Another recent incident that has put Pres. Park in a negative light is the Sewol ferry disaster. On April 16, 2014, the South Korean ferry Sewol, carrying 476 passengers and crew, among them 325 high school students, was on its way from Incheon to Jeju island when it sank, killing more than 300 people, mostly the students. To date, nine are still missing. It was rumored that Pres. Park was nowhere to be found and she was with a former political aide said to be married then. Japanese journalist Tatsuya Kato, chief of Sankei Shimbun's Seoul bureau, was singled out for printing this piece of information and defaming Ms. Park. He was charged and indicted. This incident has raised howls from international journalists amid concerns on press freedom in South Korea.

Park's handling of the Sewol ferry disaster was widely criticized. In the seven hours leading to the disaster, she received 18 reports and her only response were two orders that were standard operating procedures. It was the committee secretary who acted as spokesperson before Ms. Park could face the public herself. The investigation into the botched rescue efforts, the cause of the sinking and the violation of safety rules have been assailed by the victims' families as being controlled by Park's government. Add to that her unfulfilled promise to raise the ferry from the bottom of the sea. At the first anniversary of the sinking, the families refused to meet the president and promised to stage regular protests.

Park's Strategy to Gain Support and Popularity

Recent polls show Park's public support dropping from a low of 29% to a high of 46% from the pre-accident 70 percent. In her bid to regain her popularity in the local and international community, she must portray her nation as a victim. And the most convenient issue is a social one that targets the "bleeding hearts" of open wounds from WW2 and stoke up nationalism via anti-Japan rhetoric and propaganda. Here, the Korean comfort women fit the bill. Certainly, Japan has owned up to its' share of the blame when it comes to WWS war crimes. From 1965 to 2010, its Ministers, Cabinet officials and most significantly Emperors have made at least 14 apologies to South Korea alone, not counting the 1995 Murayama and 1993 Kono statements. It put up the Asian Women's Fund to give monetary compensation to the comfort women in various countries, which all accepted but South Korea refused to accept. On the domestic front, Park has been successful. Polls show that 57.4% of respondents support not holding summit talks with Tokyo until yet another full apology from Japan is given. In the United States, officials and diplomats are divided. Dr. Robert L. Shapiro, a former adviser on economic affairs, sent a video message to Pres. Park stating his concern over her country's failure to forge better ties with Japan and her government's curtailment of press freedom. Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, Wendy R. Sherman was more direct, citing Park's desire for cheap applause by putting Japan in a bad light for propaganda's sake alone.

Another controversial issue between South Korea and Japan is over the Liancourt Rocks. Known as Dokdo in Korea and Takeshima in Japan, the two countries have been disputing the territorial jurisdiction of the islands, composed of two main islets and 35

smaller rocks. These islets are valued for their rich fishing grounds and production of natural gas.

The background behind ownership of these islands is confusing. South Korea has been administering them since 1954 but Japan's legal basis of possession dates back to 1904. To put an end to the dispute, Japan has suggested three times (in 1954, 1962 and 2012) that the matter be taken to the International Court of Justice, but this was rejected by South Korea each time.

South Korea hopes that the US will back them in this matter and an opinion post in the Korea Herald recently criticized its' own government's futile brinkmanship. Political analysts are not inclined to think this will lead to any serious actions, militarily speaking or that the US will take sides. Both Japan and South Korea are powerful Asian allies of the United States and showing favoritism would be detrimental to its' position. But Park Hwee-rhak, a political science professor at Kookmin University in Seoul says Japan is more important to America in its policy towards Asia because of its economic power, military technologies and its capacity to keep China in check over its ambitious expansion plans.

Comfort Women Memorials and Resolutions Spring Up in the US

Some US politicians have been quick to cash in on the comfort women issue. When House Resolution 121 sponsored by Rep. Michael Honda of Silicon Valley, Calif., was passed in 2007, it was a go-signal for politicians to cater to the wishes of the South Korean community in their electoral areas. In the guise of advancing public awareness to the injustice done to South Korean women, resolutions and statues of comfort women have been put up in cities around the United States. Local Korean-American organizations in the area applied pressure on officials to yield. These particular "voting areas" have a large community of Korean-Americans who can swing votes when elections come around.

On August 2014, the Fullerton City Council approved a resolution recognizing the Korean comfort women. In New Jersey, the State Senate passed a resolution to the same effect.

The first comfort woman monument in the US was put up in Palisades Park, NJ in 2010.

In 2012, another one was erected in Veterans Memorial in Eisenhower Park, Nassau County, NY. In March 2013, a memorial was opened in Hackensack's Bergen County, NJ and in July 2013, in Glendale Central Park, Glendale, Calif., a statue of a young girl representing a comfort woman was unveiled. In August 2014, a statue was put up in Southfield, Michigan. There are plans for another statue to be put up in Maryland.

The comfort women monuments binge-building has recently spread to Canada, with a well know political blogger calling it "a giant scam whose goal is to alienate Japan from the Western powers." The City of Burnaby in British Columbia is in the process of studying a proposal to put up a comfort woman statue in the city.

With the Vietnam comfort women coming out into public consciousness, can the US expect a deluge of similar memorials installed in the cities and parks anytime soon? And will South Korea protest against them as the Japanese did over the Korean comfort women monuments? The truth is that they won't, as the Vietnamese communities in the US hold far less political sway and the US itself would rather forget the Vietnam War.

The Atrocities in the Vietnam War

Just as the Japanese had their Comfort Women, South Korea also created brothels with Vietnam comfort women for their and the American troops' carnal pleasure. Numbering 5,000 to 30,000, stories about them are not easy to come by, thanks to the cloud of secrecy that South Korea shrouded them with.

The massacres that the Korean military committed during the Vietnam War on the Vietnamese took about 9000 lives, not counting the living survivors who had no more lives to speak of. From that time until 2000 when a more liberal administration took over in South Korea, it was taboo to talk about their participation in the war. In June 2002, the US National Archives and Records Administration declassified documents about the Vietnam War and the massacres at Phong Nhi and Phong Nhat, Hoan Chau, and Phuoc My were made public. There are also the 1966 massacres at Tay Vinh that saw 1200 civilians being slaughtered and at Go Dai with 380 people rounded up and killed. These mass slayings were all done in the same manner. The Ha My account is an example of the way the South Korean Army and Marines butchered and killed innocent men, women and children without remorse.

A first-hand account from Pamtihoa, survivor of the Ha My massacre is reprinted in The Hankyoreh. It shows the trickery and brutality of the South Korean soldiers towards the Vietnamese. In March 1965, the 3rd US Marine amphibious force landed in Da Nang, Vietnam and took over Ho Ah Bang and Di En Ban. In December 1967, the 5th regiment of the USMC handed over the Con Ninh base to the 2nd Marine brigade of South Korea, called the Blue Dragons.

The people of Ha My who had been transferred to Con Ninh base went back to their village, as life was hard at the base. Whether the Korean Marines permitted them or not is not clear. But they did provide the village people with food and supplies and the villagers returned the favor by giving them local delicacies. But, to their horror a month later, the nice Korean soldiers turned into monsters. It was on a morning that they came, entered the village with their tanks and armored vehicles and moved in three different directions. Then they gathered the villagers in three different locations to listen to a speech from the Korean commander while the soldiers gave candies to the children.

After the speech, the commander walked away and, after a few steps, made a hand gesture. In an instant, M60 machine guns and grenade launchers came out of hiding from the woods and opened fire on the shocked villagers. A total of 135 people were killed. Pamhitoa survived but lost both feet. The dead were a ghastly sight ? brains coming out of head, internal organs spilling out of bodies, decapitated limbs. Along with a few survivors, Pamhitoa buried the dead in shallow holes they had dug up. But the next day, the Korean soldiers returned with D-7 bulldozers, dug up the graves and crushed all the dead bodies.

The Vietnam Comfort Women's Stories

Unlike South Korea under Pres. Park, the Vietnam government advises its citizenry to put the past behind them and move on to the future. But, if only to make Ms. Park realize her inconsistency and how the resolution of war issues lies in her own hands, the Vietnam comfort women must be made known in the same manner as the Koreans want their stories to be shared. Surviving Vietnamese women speak of serial rapes several times a day, brutal sexual assaults and killing them after the rapes. One woman who was nine months pregnant had her stomach slit open and her entrails along with her

baby hanging out.

Korean comfort women survivors Kim Bok-dong and Gil Won-ok as well as the Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan have called on the South Korean government to acknowledge the country's wrongdoings and atone for them by way of an official apology and compensation. It was an emotional moment and an eye opener at the House of Sharing last April when Yoo Hee-nam, a comfort woman for the Japanese Army met with Nguyen Tan Lan (64) and Nguyen Thi Thanh (55), massacre survivors.

What makes the Vietnam comfort women issue worse are the consequences of the rapes are the children born out of these barbaric acts- called the Lai Dai Han, a term for mixed blooded children who are viewed as contemptible and shunned by society. There are about 5,000 to 30,000 of them, unacknowledged by their Korean fathers.

In fairness, Korean soldiers were not alone in raping the Vietnamese women. From August 1964 to May 7, 1975, there were more than 9 million military men who served in the Vietnam War. Accounts and research have proven that American GIs also participated in the rapes. But they were kept hidden and if they did reach army court-martial trials, convictions were few and sentences were light. The US government cannot deny that it shares accountability for the war crimes in the Vietnam War along with South Korea. While the official stand is always not to condone such acts, it's a different matter out in the battlefields. Commanders and generals turn a blind eye to the truth. But the war ended decades ago and the time has come for both countries to face their responsibilities and cease the hypocritical finger pointing at Japan.