

Japan apologizes to WWII sex slaves

By HIROKO TABUCHI, Associated Press Writer

Monday Mar 26, 2007

Japan's nationalist prime minister on Monday offered his clearest apology yet to women who suffered in the country's World War II military brothels, but he did not bow to international pressure to acknowledge that Tokyo forced thousands into sexual slavery.

Shinzo Abe's apology came three weeks after he set off a furor by saying there is no evidence showing the women were coerced, backtracking from a previous government admission that the Japanese military forced women to work at brothels for its troops.

"I express my sympathy toward the 'comfort women' and apologize for the situation they found themselves in," Abe told a parliamentary committee, using the euphemism for sex slaves that is used by Japanese politicians. "I apologize here and now as prime minister."

Historians say as many as 200,000 Asian women, mostly from Korea and China, worked in Japan's military-run brothels. Victims say they were forced to work at the brothels by the Japanese military and were held against their will.

But right-wing Japanese politicians, who make up the bulk of Abe's support base, have in recent weeks renewed efforts pushing for an official rollback on the landmark apology for sex slavery offered by a senior government official in 1993.

Conservative governing party lawmakers contend the women were professional prostitutes and were paid for their services. They also maintain Japanese military authorities were not directly responsible for establishing or running brothels.

Abe's earlier denial of coercion drew intense criticism from China and South Korea, which accuse Japan of failing to fully atone for wartime invasions and atrocities. Neither had any immediate reaction to his comments Monday.

The issue also has stirred debate in the United States, where a House committee is considering a nonbinding resolution calling on Japan to fully acknowledge wrongdoing during the war and to make an unambiguous apology.

State Department spokesman Tom Casey called Abe's apology a step forward, but urged Japan to deal more resolutely with the issue.

"We certainly want to see the Japanese continue to address this and to deal with it in a forthright and responsible manner that acknowledges the gravity of the crimes that were committed," Casey said.

Abe on Monday rebuffed criticism in American media for his efforts to champion the cause of Japanese citizens kidnapped by North Korean agents decades ago while refusing to admit Japan's own past kidnappings.

North Korea's "abductions and the 'comfort women' issue are a completely different matter," Abe told reporters. "The issue of the abductees is an ongoing violation of human rights, while it is not as

if the 'comfort women' issue is continuing."

Abe had said previously he would not offer a fresh apology, saying the government already expressed its remorse in the 1993 statement by then Chief Cabinet Secretary Yohei Kono — the admission of sex slavery that right-wing politicians are urging the government to withdraw.

Japan has rejected most compensation claims from women who worked in the brothels. Instead, a private fund created in 1995 by the Japanese government has provided a way to support former sex slaves without offering official government compensation.

Many women rejected the payments, however, demanding formal government compensation and an apology approved by Japan's parliament.

In another aspect of war-related damage claims, a Japanese court on Monday rejected demands for compensation of about \$1.6 million filed by a group of Chinese who were forced to work as slave labourers at a Japanese mine during World War II.

Miyazaki District Court dismissed the lawsuit seeking damages from the Japanese government and Mitsubishi Metals Corp., formerly Mitsubishi Metal, which operated the mine during the war, court spokeswoman Tomomi Hirata said.

Kyodo News Agency quoted the judge as saying the state would have had an obligation to pay damages but ruling that the compensation claims were brought after the 20-year filing deadline.

Copyright © 2007 The Associated Press. All rights reserved. The information contained in the AP News report may not be published, broadcast, rewritten or redistributed without the prior written authority of The Associated Press.