



Monday, March 19, 2007 - 12:00 AM

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Irony of sex slaves, abductees lost on Japan

By Bruce Wallace
Los Angeles Times

TOKYO — Anyone struggling to understand the Japanese government's position on the morality of kidnapping people, taking them to another country and forcing them to work against their will, can be excused for being confused by the declarations coming out of Tokyo these days.

On one hand, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe seems prepared to risk his country's reputation by claiming the Japanese military did not coerce tens of thousands of women from other Asian countries into sexual slavery during World War II.

Yet at the same time, his government cannot contain its fury over North Korea's failure to "sincerely" face up to its role in kidnapping Japanese civilians during the Cold War and forcing them to teach Japanese customs and language to North Korean spies.

There is no hint here of any awareness of the irony.

There has been almost no outcry in Japan against Abe's assertion that there is no evidence to implicate the Japanese military in the well-documented system of organized brothels in areas under its control. Major Japanese media organizations support Abe's position and have encouraged him to stick by it.

In a sign that it feels no political heat at home, the Abe Cabinet on Friday issued a statement reiterating that government archives contain no evidence of official military involvement in recruiting what the Japanese euphemistically call "comfort women."

Contrast that with the national anguish over the fate of 17 Japanese citizens allegedly kidnapped by North Korea and who Tokyo says may still be alive. One of the abductees, Megumi Yokota, who was kidnapped at age 13 three decades ago, has become an icon of Japanese victimhood, and Abe has never missed a chance to affix his career to her tragedy. Last week, his government launched a \$1 million TV advertising campaign that extolled its determination to free her and the other abductees.

"The Japanese people have little awareness about human rights," says Yoshiaki Yoshimi, a Chuo University professor and co-chairman of the Center for Research and Documentation on Japan's War Responsibility. He has received many requests about the center's scholarship since the controversy broke — all from abroad. "There was no interest in Japan," he says.

"The Japanese become very emotional about the abductees because the victims are Japanese, but they don't feel so close to other Asian women, whose suffering they see as something in the past," Yoshiaki says. "What Abe is demanding from North Korea — an apology and punishment for the people who did it — should be the same standard he applies on comfort women."

But Abe has opted to play lawyer rather than moralist on the so-called comfort women. Despite the testimony of women who were victims of the military's brothels, Abe claims there is no paper trail showing coercion in the narrow sense of soldiers breaking into homes and abducting women into forced prostitution. Any such suggestion is



JUNG YEON-JE / AFP/GETTY IMAGES

A South Korean woman who served as a sex slave for Japanese troops during World War II attends an anti-Japanese rally in Seoul last week.

a "complete fabrication," he told parliament.

How, critics ask, could a prime minister who came to office vowing to create a "beautiful Japan" that spoke with credibility on global affairs end up squabbling over details with now-octogenarian women about the degree of coercion that was used to conscript them into a network of serial rape?

Some say it is rooted in his government's falling poll numbers, which has left him vulnerable to attack from the nationalist wing of his party. These conservatives once saw Abe as their champion but accuse him of going soft since becoming prime minister.

Others argue he was merely speaking his mind, noting his record of criticizing what he described as Japan's masochistic culture of endlessly apologizing for World War II and its related crimes.

It's unclear whether Abe knows, or worries, about the damage his obfuscation has done to Japan's image abroad. He has dismissed criticism as Japan-bashing spawned by a misrepresentation of his position by foreign media.

But the sex-slavery issue comes at what was supposed to be a shining period of breakthroughs for Japanese diplomacy: a visit by Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao to repair Japan's shaky relations with its Asian rival, and a trip to Washington in April to draw attention to the robust health of the alliance with Japan's one indispensable partner.

Eager to keep warming relations on track, the Chinese government has been muted in its criticisms of Abe's statements about the wartime brothels. But the Washington visit seems certain to be dogged by protests from aggrieved women's groups, and attract sharp questions about whether the United State's firmest ally in Asia is backsliding on a central moral question.

And it will come as Congress considers a resolution introduced by Rep. Mike Honda, D-Calif., calling on Tokyo to issue a formal, unconditional apology over the comfort women. Abe has dismissed the Honda resolution as "not based on objective facts" and vowed his government would not apologize again, whether the resolution passed or not, a statement that cut the legs from under Japan's best supporters in Washington.

"There is no difference of opinion on the issue in the United States," said Thomas Schieffer, the U.S. ambassador to Japan, who said he took the word of the women who recently testified to Congress.

"They were raped by the Japanese military," Schieffer said. "I think that happened. And I think it was a regrettable, terrible thing that it happened."

Abe's dilemma is that although legalistic hair-splitting about responsibility may play well in Tokyo's political backrooms or with conservative academics, it is volatile material abroad, where Japan's former victims and its current friends alike demand Japanese prime ministers deliver an unambiguous moral condemnation of the sexual slavery.

And no one knows the emotional potency of defending the victims of kidnapping better than Abe, who fashioned his nationalist career on the back of the abductees' media soap opera.

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