

Korean Slave Laborers: Repatriating and Burying the Dead

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by Asahi Shimbun

[New efforts are underway to overcome deep strains in Japan-Korea relations in a year in which territorial disputes flared over the Tokdo Islands (Takeshima) and over the treatment of war, colonialism and atrocities in new Japanese school textbooks.]

Although it comes more than 60 years after the fact, Tokyo is trying to get an accurate picture of the use of Korean civilians-often as forced labor-in wartime Japan.

In doing so, it hopes to take some of the sting out of its strained relations with Seoul.

At South Korea's request, the government for the first time is trying to ascertain what conditions Korean civilians faced. Civilians were mostly put to work in Japan's coal mines and factories. Many endured great hardship and brutal conditions and died in Japan.

In April, the Foreign Ministry sent questionnaires to 100 companies that relied on Korean labor during World War II, sources said.

Questionnaires were also sent to companies that took over some of those wartime entities.

Officials intend to relay their findings to Seoul in August.

Tokyo's decision follows moves by the South Korean government to unearth the truth about Koreans used as forced laborers by Japan.

While some historians put the number of Korean civilians made to work in this country at more than 700,000, no precise figures are known.

Officials said they hope the firms still have rosters of Korean workers, and other information, such as the location of remains of those who perished.

Repatriating the Dead

On Friday, Foreign Minister Machimura Nobutaka informed his South Korean counterpart Ban Ki-moon of Tokyo's plans to locate and repatriate the remains of Koreans who worked for Japanese companies during the war.

Meeting in Kyoto, the foreign ministers also agreed that a summit between Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro and Roh Moo Hyun would be held in the South Korean capital in late June.

Japanese officials are now trying to determine the feasibility of returning wartime remains to South Korea.

In 1969, the governments of the two countries reached agreement on the return of remains of Koreans who fought alongside imperial Japanese forces as well as Korean civilians who worked for the military during the war.

Under the agreement, the remains were to be returned to their family members or to people

close to them in South Korea.

As of the end of March, the remains of 8,835 such people had been sent to South Korea. In addition, the remains of 1,136 others are being kept at Yutenji temple in Tokyo, partly because the families or rightful claimants have not been identified.

Is the Government Responsible for Koreans Working for Private Companies?

Another reason is that Tokyo has maintained that civilian Koreans working in the private sector during the war were "not directly employed by the state." Thus, until now, nothing was done about repatriating those remains.

The government decided to take action after Roh sought Tokyo's cooperation in the matter during a meeting with Koizumi in December.

Tokyo, trying to avoid a further deterioration in its relations with South Korea over Japan's past military deeds, readily complied.

And on April 7, Machimura promised his counterpart that action would be taken.

Resolving Historical Issues of Japanese

Colonialism in Korea

The Japanese government has said it intends to resolve issues connected to its 1910 to 1945 colonization of the Korean Peninsula and wartime militarism.

For example, it has decided to accept applications at Japanese diplomatic missions overseas for medical care coverage from Korean atomic bomb victims now living in South Korea.

It also plans to establish within the year a new joint committee of researchers to study history issues between the two countries.

The government is also considering including Koreans in a government search for Japanese soldiers who died during the conflict in the South Pacific, sources said.

Tokyo is working to include Koreans in a government program to pay subsidies for families of war dead visiting former battlefields overseas.

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