

The Japanese Apology on the “Comfort Women” Cannot Be Considered Official: Interview with Congressman Michael Honda

Kinue Tokudome

[Japan Focus introduction: Prime Minister Abe Shinzo recently added another entry to the long, sorry chapter of official Japanese war-crime denials when he said that there was no coercion of the so-called comfort-women by the imperial military “in the narrow sense of the word.” On March 1, an historic day in the history of Korean resistance to Japanese colonial rule, he said: “The fact is, there is no evidence to prove there was coercion.”

Liberal Democratic Party power broker Nakayama Nariaki further insulted the dwindling group of surviving women when he compared government involvement in the brothels that enslaved them to college canteens. “Some say it is useful to compare the brothels to college cafeterias run by private companies,” he said.

In the furor that followed and in the lead-up to a potentially booby-trapped visit to Washington, Abe backpedaled and issued a series of unsatisfying but politically expedient mea culpas, saying he stood by the famous 1993 statement by Kono Yohei, acknowledging state involvement in the brothels and culminating in an expression of sympathy during his stateside trip that sought to lay the matter to rest.

In a one-hour meeting with US politicians arranged by Sen. Daniel Inouye of Hawaii and hosted by Sen. Nancy Pelosi, Abe was reported to have expressed sympathy for the victims: “As an individual, and the prime minister, I sympathize from the bottom of my heart with the former comfort women who experienced this extreme hardship. I’m deeply sorry about the situation in which they were placed.”

Calling such remarks an apology—to the US President not the comfort women—George Bush sought to lay the issue to rest in order to get on to the important issues of redefining the US-Japan military relationship. But the problem is unlikely to end there. On close analysis, the Abe statement is a model of the equivocation that has long characterized many official pronouncements on Japanese war crimes. It managed, for example, to douse the fires in Washington caused by his original denial while still conceding nothing on the key issue of coercion.

The man at the center of this storm in the US is Japanese-American Congressman Mike Honda, who reignited the comfort women debate by tabling [House Resolution 121](#) on January 31, 2007. The nonbinding resolution, which presently has 129 cosponsors, calls on Tokyo to “formally acknowledge, apologize, and accept historical responsibility in a clear and unequivocal manner, refute any claims that the issue of comfort women never occurred, and educate current and future generations about this horrible crime.” See [Honda’s statement](#) at the Hearing on Protecting the Human Rights of Comfort Women.

Honda has since been attacked and smeared in the conservative Japanese press, especially in the Sankei and Yomiuri newspapers, which have accused him of pandering to his Chinese- and Korean-American constituents and undermining the US-Japan alliance. Throughout, Honda has stood firm, denying charges of Japan-bashing and pleading with Japan to finally come clean about this sordid episode from its past.

Here he answers his critics.]

T: Your “Comfort Women” resolution is getting much attention in Japan. Why did you introduce this resolution?

H: The purpose is to bring about public discussion and debate and to challenge Japanese politicians, not Japanese people, to address these issues in a forthright way.



Congressman Honda and Kinue Tokudome

I passed the resolution AJR 27 in California Assembly in 1999 and it caused quite a bit of stir with the Consulate General (of Japan) in San Francisco. They said, “Why California? This is a national and international issue, not a state issue.” But it still passed. Then I went to Congress and said, “I am in Congress now. I will introduce this resolution again and it will be on a national and international level.”

We did that (addressing historical injustice) here in this country as Nikkeis for the 1942 internment. They took our rights away. We challenged our own community first saying, “We have to sue our government to have them apologize properly by reparations.” It took ten years. In 1988, HR 442 (The Civil Liberties Act of 1988) was passed and President signed it. That is a formal, unambiguous and unequivocal government apology.

What Japan has done to now is to offer individual apologies. Individually, they may have been sincere except for maybe Prime Minister Abe. I don’t think Prime Minister Abe is sincere because he changed his mind so often. It was not a formal governmental apology that was an open and transparent apology. I think we have been very polite. They know what we are saying and they know what the women victims are asking for. They understand that.

The primary effort now is to educate the public, the Japanese public and the US public, because I believe that the public is a very open minded, compassionate and educated group. It is just that they have to be moved to action.

It puzzles me why that is not happening in Japan. Here in this country, we have newspaper editorials writing about it. Australia has its editorials. Canada has its editorials. The Canadians just passed a resolution. (On the Comfort women issue.) So it’s catching fire, except in Japan.

T: The first official Japanese reaction to your resolution was Foreign Minister Aso Taro’s statement in the Diet. He said, “It is extremely regrettable that the resolution is definitely not based on facts or the efforts that have been made by the Japanese government on this issue.” How would you respond?

H: I got the facts from historians in Japan. Certainly the Japanese military after the war destroyed a lot of information. But some information was unearthed. We have eyewitnesses and we have victims. If their testimony were untrue, then all the major countries would be hesitant to support this issue.

So I don’t know what they (Japanese officials) are talking about. I wish they would point out on what piece of information I am inaccurate. Am I inaccurate that there was not a formal apology? In this country, a formal apology from the government is from Congress and then the president.

An institution must be judged by its behavior. Individual Prime Ministers have offered their “heartfelt apology.” They were all individual apologies.

T: Prime Minister Abe Shinzo stated that he would stick to the Kono Statement of 1993 while insisting that there has been no evidence to directly establish the involvement of Japan's military authorities or government officials.

H: He can make his case here. I want to respect his opportunity to talk to our president and to lobby any other Congressman if he so desires. So I will do it (pass the resolution) after he leaves. If he talks about it there (in Japan) he should talk about it here.

But I must ask, “How can anyone say that coercion and recruitment did not happen the way these women say it happened?” Instead, some people in Japan are saying that it was like any college campus where you have a cafeteria that was run by private companies, who recruit their own staff, procure food, and set prices. That was how comfort women were recruited and provided their services. That is so offensive. I don’t know how you can make comments like that and still walk down the street without being criticized.

T: What is the US government’s position on the “Comfort Women” resolution?

H: Our State Department has been silent. All they have said after Prime Minister Abe said in the Diet that he was apologizing as Prime Minister is that “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.”

T: Sankei Shimbun published articles on the political contributions you received from Chinese-American activist groups and accused you of being influenced by groups that have a connection to the Chinese authorities.

H: I get contributions from Chinese Americans, Korean Americans, Mexican Americans, African Americans, Japanese Americans and White Americans. And I raise a lot of money for our party. It’s against the law to receive money from a foreign government. If people who are saying this had any guts, they would ask me straight. They don’t have any guts. They would rather lie or give disinformation to smear my character through the media.

T: Some people in Japan say, “What about the United States? Its bombing of civilian populations in major Japanese cities and dropping of the two Atomic bombs were clearly war crimes also.

H: If you want to debate the dropping of the Atomic bombs, let’s debate. My wife was a survivor of the Hiroshima Atomic bomb. She was 3 years old when the bomb was dropped. I joined the Peace Movement in Hiroshima that was started by the Mayor. If you want to debate the Tokyo fire bombing, let’s talk about it.

T: There are also those in Japan who would say that the United States has engaged in many wars such as the Vietnam War and the Iraq War. So how can such a nation pass a resolution concerning a Japanese historical issue arising out of events that occurred more than 60 years ago?

H: Yes, we have a trigger-happy Texan as our president who got us into the war. I was not a part of it.

T: You voted no for Bush's war in Iraq did you not?

H: Yes. I was disappointed but respected their decision according to the Constitution. So we are not perfect.

But the Japanese people also must know that when Japanese Parliamentarians came to the United States with the parents of the girl who had been kidnapped, I said that I would support them in criticizing North Korea. I also said that I would do so with the same vigor that I was exhibiting for POWs and Comfort Women. That was the right thing to do.

T: Prime Minister Abe said that the abductions and the Comfort Women are totally separate issues. He said, "The abduction issue concerns the ongoing infringement of human rights. The comfort women issue is not a matter which is continuing."

H: But the women are still alive.

T: Prime Minister Abe restored Sino-Japan relations by visiting China immediately after he took his office. Now a joint historical study project has been started. There are people who wonder why you take actions that could become a hindrance to such positive developments.

H: My answer to that for Japan is, "Just come clean, come up with a clean apology that would satisfy the former Comfort Women." I would say that probably the Korean government and the Chinese government would then have to say, "Thank you" and they could not raise this issue again. That would put the issue into rest.

T: Doesn't passing of this resolution have a negative impact on US-Japan relations?

H: I always preface by saying that the purpose of this resolution is not to bash or humiliate Japan.

T: But the Japanese media say that the passage of this resolution may create anti-Japan sentiment within the US.

H: They should do their research into what I say. Also, before we introduced this resolution, we let the Japanese Embassy know. We notified them. So it was not a sneak attack.

Why would I be anti-Japan? My relatives live there. We fight. For example, "Save whales." But don't call Japanese names.

I fight for balanced and accurate dialogue and debate. I am against racial profiling in this country and I am against racial profiling in international politics.

When I appeared on a Japanese TV program, I was asked, "You have a face like ours. Why are you doing this?" My answer is still the same. I can have a black face or a brown face or a white face. This comes from my heart.

Even some Japanese Americans are asking why I am doing this. I tell them, “If you accepted the reparation check, you have nothing to say.”

T: Are you aware that there are people in Japan who have been trying hard for many years to resolve the Comfort Women issue? For example, opposition parties in the Diet have introduced a bill several times since 2000, without success, seeking a government apology and compensation to the victims.

H: I know of those people. I am aware that they have several times introduced a resolution or bill to acknowledge, apologize and compensate Comfort Women. But the fact remains that they are the minority parties and the LDP is the ruling party. Just like the Republican Party was the ruling party in Congress for 12 years. We changed that last year. We went to the people and we made an issue of Iraq, that we were lied to and that it was the wrong thing to do. We made an issue of Katrina. We told the country that the Republicans do not deserve to govern. And people voted the Republicans out and voted us back in. That’s why we are doing this now.

I hope that those politicians who are working for resolution of the “Comfort Women” issue can figure out the way to get it passed. I understand that this is a frustrating struggle for them. But they have to have 51% to succeed. I think that’s why my attention is towards the public, asking them to look at this and tell their politicians to do something. It’s important, so important because these women are going to die and they should not die without being satisfied by an apology. The Japanese people understand honor more than anybody else, don’t they?

T: Would you like to go to Japan after your resolution is passed?

H: I wouldn’t mind going before it passes. I will debate.

T: When I first met you in 2000, you said to me that you were an educator. Do you think your being an educator still affects your work as a politician?

H: Yes, if I were a politician, I would drop this. I have to continue to put it out so that eventually people will get it. A teacher believes every child can learn. A teacher also understands every child learns differently and some take more time than others. It seems that members of the LDP need more time to learn while others who want to do something understand.

Afterword

T: Congressman Honda also serves as Vice Chair of the Democratic National Committee. A senior staff member of a US Senator from California describes Congressman Honda as follows:

“I have known Mike at least 15 years. I have seen how politics changes people and for Mike, he was always in touch with his constituents and more. National leadership has not changed that. He stands tall among his constituents for responsiveness and accountability. He represents his district well and is not beholden to special interest groups. The Comfort Women issue is not a special interest group. The Party recognizes Mike’s ability to raise money because of the loyalty of his supporters and they are not all Asian, most are non-Asian.”

Congressman Honda has also been working for former POWs of the Japanese. In 2001, together with Republican Congressman Dana Rohrabacher, he introduced a bill that would allow former POWs of the Japanese, who sued Japanese companies for WWII forced labor, to have their day

in court. (The bill was not seeking compensation from Japanese companies.) Although it gained many co-sponsors from both parties, because of the political climate of post-9/11 in the US, it did not pass and all of the POW lawsuits against Japanese companies were dismissed.

However, Congressman Honda is not forgetting the POW issue because from the standpoint of “justice” and “honor” it is the same with the “Comfort Women” issue. When I met him this time, the first thing he said to me was, “The POW issue will be next.”

Kinue Tokudome is the founder and executive director of a California non-profit organization “U.S.-Japan Dialogue on POWs” that maintains a bilingual [website](#).

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