BACKGROUND OF 'COMFORT WOMEN' ISSUE / Comfort station originated in govt-regulated 'civilian prostitution'

The Yomiuri Shimbun

Controversy over the so-called comfort women has been inflamed again. The U.S. House of Representatives has been deliberating a draft resolution calling for the Japanese government to apologize over the matter by spurning the practice as slavery and human trafficking. Why has such a biased view of the issue prevailed? The Yomiuri Shimbun carried in-depth reports on the issue Tuesday. The writers are Masanobu Takagi, Hiroaki Matsunaga and Emi Yamada of the political news department. Starting today, The Daily Yomiuri will carry the stories in three installments.

To discuss the comfort women issue, it is indispensable to understand the social background of the time when prostitution was authorized and regulated by the government in Japan. Prostitution was tacitly permitted in limited areas up until 1957, when the law to prevent prostitution was enforced.

Comfort women received remuneration in return for sexual services at so-called comfort stations for military officers and soldiers. According to an investigation report publicized by the government on Aug. 4, 1993, on the issue of comfort women recruited into sexual service for the Japanese military, there is a record mentioning the establishment of such a brothel in Shanghai around 1932, and additional similar facilities were established in other parts of China occupied by the Imperial Japanese Army.

Some of them were under the direct supervision of the military authorities, but many of the brothels catering to soldiers were privately operated.

Modern historian Ikuhiko Hata, a former professor at Nihon University, says the comfort women system should be defined as the "battleground version of civilian prostitution."

Comfort women were not treated as "paramilitary personnel," unlike jugun kangofu (military nurses) and jugun kisha (military correspondents). During the war, comfort women were not called "jugun ianfu" (prostitutes for troops). Use
of such generic terminology spread after the war. The latter description is said to have been used by writer Kako Senda (1924-2000) in his book titled "Jugun Ianfu" published in 1973. Thereafter, the usage of jugun ianfu prevailed.

In addition to Japanese women, women from the Korean Peninsula and Taiwan, both then under Japanese colonial rule, and China, the Philippines, Indonesia and other countries invaded by the Imperial Japanese Army were recruited as comfort women.

Hata estimates that 40 percent of the wartime comfort women were Japanese, 30 percent Chinese and other nationalities and 20 percent Korean.

The total number of comfort women has yet to be determined exactly.

According to a report compiled by Radhika Coomaraswany of the U.N. Commission on Human Rights in 1996, there were 200,000 comfort women from the Korean Peninsula alone. The figure in the report was based on information Coomaraswany had obtained in North Korea. But this report contained many factual errors, and its quoted sources lacked impartiality. Foreign Minister Taro Aso rejected the figure of 200,000 as "lacking objective evidence."

The reasons cited for the need for comfort women and wartime brothels are as follows:

-- To prevent military officers and soldiers from raping women and committing other sex crimes in occupied areas.

-- To prevent venereal disease from spreading through troops who would otherwise contact local prostitutes who did not receive periodic medical checks.

-- To prevent military secrets from being leaked by limiting the women who provided sexual services to officers and soldiers to recruited comfort women.

Such a system and the use of wartime brothels generally are not limited only to the Imperial Japanese military.

The U.S. troops that occupied Japan after the war used brothels provided by the Japanese side. There was a case in which U.S. military officials asked the Japanese authorities to provide women for sexual services. During the Vietnam War, brothels similar to those established for the former Japanese military were available to U.S. troops, a U.S. woman journalist has pointed out.

Hata said: "There were wartime brothels also for the German troops during World War II. Some women were forced into sexual slavery. South Korean troops had brothels during the Korean War, according to a finding by a South Korean researcher."

(Mar. 31, 2007)
BACKGROUND OF 'COMFORT WOMEN' ISSUE / No hard evidence of coercion in recruitment of comfort women

The Yomiuri Shimbun

This is the second installment on the so-called "comfort women" controversy. The U.S. House of Representatives has been deliberating a draft resolution calling for the Japanese government to apologize over the matter by spurning the practice as slavery and human trafficking. Why has such a biased view of the issue prevailed?

The issue of the so-called comfort women has been brought up repeatedly because misunderstandings that the Japanese government and the Imperial Japanese Army forced women into sexual servitude have not been completely dispelled.

The government has admitted the Imperial Japanese Army's involvement in brothels, saying that "the then Japanese military was, directly or indirectly, involved in the establishment and management of the comfort stations and the transfer of comfort women." The "involvement" refers to giving the green light to opening a brothel, building facilities, setting regulations regarding brothels, such as fees and opening hours, and conducting inspections by army doctors.

However, the government has denied that the Japanese military forcibly recruited women. On March 18, 1997, a Cabinet Secretariat official said in the Diet, "There is no evidence in public documents that clearly shows there were any forcible actions [in recruiting comfort women]." No further evidence that could disprove this statement has been found.

The belief that comfort women were forcibly recruited started to spread when Seiji Yoshida, who claimed to be a former head of the mobilization department of the Shimonoseki branch of an organization in charge of recruiting laborers, published a book titled "Watashi no Senso Hanzai" (My War Crime) in 1983. Yoshida said in the book that he had been involved in looking for suitable women to force them into sexual slavery in Jeju, South Korea. "We surrounded
wailing women, took them by the arms and dragged them out into the street one by one," he said in the book.

But researchers concluded in the mid-1990s that the stories in the book are not authentic. On March 5 this year, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe said at the House of Councillors Budget Committee that Yoshida's story does not prove that women were forcibly recruited. He said: "I think it was The Asahi Shimbun [that reported the story] that a man named Seiji Yoshida testified about his having searched for comfort women. But later [Yoshida's testimony] was found to have been made up."

As the comfort women issue started to take on political and diplomatic dimensions, some people in South Korea and also in Japan confused comfort women with female volunteer corps, strengthening the misbelief that there was coercion.

Female volunteer corps were, according to a historian Ikuhiko Hata's book "Ianfu to Senjo no Sei" (Comfort Women and Sex in the Battlefield), single women aged between 12 and 40 who were mobilized to work in factories, starting in August 1944, primarily to secure necessary labor.

There were cases in which malicious brokers sweet-talked women with promises of easy money or intentionally concealed from them what life was going to be like in brothels.

The War Ministry wrote a letter, dated March 4, 1938, to the troops dispatched to China. The letter, titled "Regarding the recruiting of women at the army's comfort stations," said there were malicious brokers who were recruiting women in a way "similar to kidnapping."

It said, "Nothing should be overlooked so that the military's prestige and social orders are maintained." The letter indicates how the Imperial Japanese Army tried to make sure that women were not forcibly recruited.

However, in the confusion of war, elite Imperial Japanese Army soldiers who were on the fast track for officer status sent detained Dutch women to a brothel in Indonesia. The incident came to be known as the Semarang incident.

The Imperial Japanese Army Headquarters closed down the brothel immediately after learning of the incident, and soldiers involved received severe punishment—some were sentenced to death—at a war crimes court convened by the Dutch Army after the war.

(Mar. 31, 2007)
BACKGROUND OF 'COMFORT WOMEN' ISSUE / Kono's statement on 'comfort women' created misunderstanding

The Yomiuri Shimbun

This is the third and last installment on the so-called "comfort women" controversy. The U.S. House of Representatives has been deliberating a draft resolution calling for the Japanese government to apologize over the matter by spurning the practice as slavery and human trafficking. Why has such a biased view of the issue prevailed?

What made the issue of "comfort women" a political and diplomatic one was an article in the Jan. 11, 1992, morning edition of The Asahi Shimbun. The newspaper reported that official documents and soldiers' diaries that proved the wartime Japanese military's involvement in the management of brothels and the recruitment of comfort women had been found at the library of the Defense Ministry's National Institute for Defense Studies.

The article said Koreans accounted for about 80 percent of comfort women from the time that brothels were established and that the women, said to have totaled 80,000 to 200,000, were forcibly recruited under the name of volunteer corps after the Pacific War broke out.

As the newspaper's report came out immediately before then Prime Minister Kiichi Miyazawa's visit to South Korea, it triggered anger among the South Korean public. During his visit to the nation, Miyazawa met with then South Korean President Roh Tae Woo and was quoted as telling him, "It can't be denied that the Japanese military--in some way--was involved in the recruitment of comfort women and the management of comfort stations."

On July 6, 1992, then Chief Cabinet Secretary Koichi Kato released the results of a study showing that the wartime military was directly involved in such things as the operation of "comfort stations," but documents to prove that forcible recruitment actually took place were not found.
But as South Korea's criticism over Japan's actions continued, the government issued an official statement on the issue on Aug. 4, 1993, which became known as the Kono statement, after the government official who delivered it, Chief Cabinet Secretary Yohei Kono.

But Kono's statement included ambiguous expressions and gave the impression that the government had acknowledged forcible recruitment by wartime Japanese authorities.

Regarding the recruitment of comfort women, the statement said: "The recruitment of the comfort women was conducted mainly by private recruiters who acted in response to the request of the military. The government study has revealed that in many cases they were recruited against their own will, through coaxing, coercion, and so on, and that, at times, administrative and military personnel directly took part in the recruitment."

The statement also said the recruitment, transfer and control of comfort women on the Korean Peninsula was "conducted generally against their will." This expression became a strong indication that women, in most cases, were taken in a forcible manner.

By issuing the statement, the government aimed to seek a political settlement over the issue, as South Korea pressed the Japanese government hard to recognize that forcible recruitment actually took place. Then Deputy Chief Cabinet Secretary Nobuo Ishihara, who was involved in compiling the statement, said, "As there were no documents to prove forcible recruitment, it was concluded, out of comprehensively made judgments based on testimonies of [former] comfort women, that [recruitment] was forceful."

Kono's statement did not resolve the issue. Instead, it spread misunderstanding both inside and outside the nation on the "forcible recruitment" by government authorities.

A U.N. Human Rights Commission report, compiled by Radhika Coomaraswamy, referred to comfort women as sex slaves, and called on the Japanese government to compensate these women and to punish those responsible. The report reached these conclusions partly on the grounds of Kono's statement.

Mike Honda, a Democratic member of the U.S. House of Representatives who led lawmakers in submitting a draft resolution denouncing Japan over the comfort women issue, also referred to Kono's statement as a basis for the draft resolution.

However, observers have pointed out, and The Yomiuri Shimbun reported on the morning edition of March 16, that there are certain factors regarding Honda's
electoral district--such an increase in the number of residents of Chinese or South Korean origins, while the number of Japanese-origin residents has decreased--that may be behind why the Japanese-American lawmaker of California is leading such an initiative.

Given the Kono statement, the government in July 1995 established an incorporated foundation called the Asian Women's Fund. It has provided a total of about 1.3 billion yen in compensation for 364 former comfort women. Letters of apology from successive prime ministers--Ryutaro Hashimoto, Keizo Obuchi, Yoshiro Mori and Junichiro Koizumi--also were sent to those women.

On Oct. 5 at the House of Representatives Budget Committee, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe indicated a stance to "inherit" Kono's statement in principle, while denying forcible recruitment by government authorities.

(Apr. 1, 2007)