

Remarks by Deputy Director-General / Deputy Assistant Minister (UN Ambassador) of the Foreign Policy Bureau Otaka for the Consideration of the Tenth and Eleventh Combined Periodic Report by the Government of Japan under the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (August 2018) (excerpt)

On the comfort women issue, which many members have raised, I will not repeat Japan's legal position including in relation with the Convention and on claims of individuals, as I already explained yesterday.

Having said that, recognizing that the comfort women issue severely injured the honor and dignity of many women, the Government of Japan, together with the people of Japan, seriously discussed what could be done to express their sincere apologies and remorse to the former comfort women. As a result, the Asian Women's Fund (AWF) was established on July 19, 1995, through joint efforts made by the people and the Government of Japan, in order to extend atonement from the Japanese people to the former comfort women. The Government of Japan has extended its utmost cooperation to the projects of the AWF, which carried out "medical and welfare support projects" and provided "atonement money" to offer realistic relief to former comfort women, who were already advanced in years. When these projects were carried out, then-Prime Ministers of Japan sent a signed letter expressing apologies and remorse directly to each former comfort woman.

While the AWF was disbanded in March 2007, the Government of Japan is continuing its efforts to gain a better understanding of the sincere feelings of the people and the Government of Japan as embodied in the projects of the AWF. It will also continue its efforts to ensure that Japan's views and efforts on the comfort women issue are properly valued in the international community, based on an objective understanding of relevant facts.

Some Committee members pointed out former comfort women in countries and regions other than the ROK. In fact, the AWF provided "atonement money," welfare support project, and letters by then-Prime Ministers expressing apologies and remorse, not only to former comfort women in the ROK but also to those in the Philippines and Taiwan.

Moreover, the AWF provided financial support for building elder care facilities in

Indonesia, where the Government of Indonesia found it difficult to identify former comfort women. In the Netherlands, where no authorities could identify former comfort women at the time of the AWF's establishment, the Fund provided financial support for a welfare project that helped to enhance the living conditions of those who suffered incurable physical and psychological wounds during World War II. I seek your understanding that Japan has also made its utmost efforts in countries and areas other than the ROK.

On the other hand, in the ROK, there were voices to demand the Government of Japan for state compensation, and some former comfort women who had received or wanted to receive benefit from the AWF's projects were subject to "harassment" or criticism. Despite such a situation, the AWF was able to provide benefit to 61 former comfort women in the ROK. The former comfort women who received the benefit have expressed gratitude to the people and the Government of Japan. I believe this shows that the Government and people of Japan were able to get through to the former comfort women. On the specific number 61, Japan had been refraining from making it public up until recently. This was out of consideration for the position of those former comfort women who received the benefit.

There are voices that claim Japan denies or distorts the facts. However, I would like to make clear that Japan does not deny the issue of comfort women. On the other hand, we believe that there are some inaccurate information and misunderstanding on this issue. I think that the background of why this issue has drawn such attention is somewhat unfortunate. For instance, in his book titled "My War Crime" published in 1983, the late Seiji Yoshida wrote a fabricated story by illustrating himself "hunting many women by order of the Japanese military in Jeju Island of the ROK". At the time, the content of his book was widely reported to the international community as if it had been a true story by a major Japanese newspaper. This has drawn attention and become one of the major sources to create an image on this issue. In this sense, the story has had a strong impact. However, Yoshida's story has later been proven to be entirely a product of imagination. In fact, the major newspaper company later admitted to having published erroneous articles, and officially apologized for it to their readers. I think that such a background is not well-known enough, or in some ways ignored or neglected. I hope the issue is discussed or valued based on an objective understanding. In this respect, I would like you to read various publications by experts and academics, as some of them are translated in English.

As a result of considerable diplomatic efforts, the Japan-ROK agreement of December 2015 confirmed that the comfort women issue is resolved “finally and irreversibly”. This Japan-ROK agreement has not only been welcomed by the international community, including Mr. Ban Ki-moon, then Secretary-General of the United Nations, but has also been positively received by many former comfort women in the ROK.

In accordance with the agreement, the Government of Japan contributed 1 billion yen to the Reconciliation and Healing Foundation, which was established by the Government of the ROK based on the agreement, and projects have actually been carried out for recovering the honor and dignity and healing the psychological wounds of former comfort women. So far, among the 47 former comfort women who were alive at the time of the agreement, 36 have already agreed to the projects, of which 34 have actually received such support as medical and welfare support.

In order to recover the honor and dignity and heal the psychological wounds of former comfort women, it is extremely important that the agreement, reached between Japan and the ROK and positively received by the international community as well as former comfort women, is steadily implemented. We must never let the future generations be responsible for this issue.

Japan is of the view that the phrase “sexual slavery” is not appropriate because it contradicts the facts. We strongly oppose the use of such phrase. Japan confirmed this point with the ROK at the timing of the Japan-ROK agreement, and notes that the phrase is not at all used in the agreement.

(end)