

# 'Comfort Women' and Asian Security

By Kiyoshi Odawara

On Dec. 28, 2015, Japan reached a historic agreement with the Republic of Korea on the comfort-women issue, in which the honor and dignity of many women were at stake. In the agreement, the issue is "resolved finally and irreversibly," thereby removing an obstacle to better Japan-ROK relations. This breakthrough won praise from many countries, including the U.S.

Japan literally has implemented its responsibilities based on this agreement. In August 2016, the government contributed one billion yen (\$8.8 million) to a newly established foundation for the purpose of providing support for former comfort women.

Using these funds, in October the foundation began its projects. Of the 46 surviving former comfort women at the time of the agreement, 34 agreed to the projects and 29 have already received medical

treatment, nursing care and other support.

We also expected that the ROK would strive to solve the issue of the comfort-woman statue in front of the Japanese Embassy in Seoul, in accordance with the agreement. By so doing, we believed that we would be able to celebrate the anniversary of this agreement on Dec. 28, 2016, together with the ROK.

A situation occurred that threatens to shake the essential foundation of the agreement. On Dec. 30, a new comfort-woman statue was installed in front of the Consulate General of Japan in Busan by a Korean activist group with the approval of the municipality.

That such a situation occurred despite the agreement to resolve the comfort-women issue finally and irreversibly is highly regrettable. The installation is also problematic in light of the Vienna Convention on Consular Relations.

This agreement is the second on this issue since 1965,

when the two countries completely and finally settled the problems concerning property and claims. At a time when the people of both countries are concerned about the peace and prosperity of the region, it is difficult to accept the actions of activists undermining the trust and expectation of friendship that we have built up.

On Jan. 6, the government of Japan had no choice but to take measures including the temporary recall of its ambassador to the ROK and its consul general in Busan. It is a bitter disappointment that we had to protest when our two countries should have been celebrating the anniversary of this agreement.

The ROK is Japan's most important neighbor with common strategic interests. Now more than ever, when North Korea continues nuclear tests and ballistic missile launches, Japan and the ROK should be working together to deter these reckless provocations.

This must be recognized as a new level of threat, capable of reaching even the mainland of the U.S. In response, coordination among Japan, the ROK, and the U.S., is absolutely necessary.

There are many other areas in which Japan and the ROK can cooperate. Both are energy-importing countries, and face common issues such as a rapidly declining birthrate and an aging society. Japan and the ROK have worked closely together both bilaterally and globally in the past to address these common challenges.

Execution of the agreement is the foundation of trust and cooperation between the two countries and, thus, the duty of both governments. Japan is determined to continue to contribute to peace and stability in the international community through cooperation with the Republic of Korea.

*Mr. Odawara is Japan's parliamentary vice minister for foreign affairs.*