

## PM: War Crimes: The Comfort Women

By Polly Mann

A New York Times article of May 18th carried an article about a New Jersey monument to the so-called "Comfort Women" of World War II: those tens of thousands of women and girls who were forced into brutal sexual slavery by the Japanese military. Many of them were teenagers and most were from the Philippines and Korea.

The article caught my attention because in the mid 80s, WAMM members Sarah Martin, Marianne Hamilton, and I were in the Philippines protesting some aspect of President Bill Clinton's foreign policy. While there we visited an agency that supported the Philippine Comfort Women. We met about fifteen to twenty so-called Comfort Women who were, by then, in their sixtieth or seventieth decade of life. For entertainment the women had hired an instructor to give us all dancing lessons. Sounds rather bizarre but it was actually a lot of fun.



Comfort Women memorial, Seoul, South Korea, across from the Japanese embassy, which wants it removed.

The sad history of Comfort Women had its roots in 1937 when the Japanese Imperial Army invaded China. Japanese soldiers raped at least 20,000 Chinese women during the first four weeks of the conflict. This event was known as the “Rape of Nanjing.” It is said that the Japanese military sought a solution to avoid a similar situation in World War II. This was to send women along with the troops to provide sexual services for them.

One of the Comfort Women told us that, after the war, when she had explained to her family what had happened to her, they totally rejected her. Each woman's story was different, of course, but all were tragic and the women wanted apologies and atonement reparations from an unwilling Japanese government. The Japanese had decided that the supplier of funds would be a private agency, acting in lieu of the Japanese government. Most of the women refused the funds, stating that they wanted the government, itself, to issue an official statement and reparations.

The Times article deals solely with the Korean Comfort Women who have been memorialized in a monument in New Jersey, the only one of its kind in this country. However, because of this recent action many other Korean groups in the United States have shown interest in erecting similar monuments.

The idea had also taken root elsewhere—there is memorial in the Philippines and one in South Korea. But tensions between Japan and South Korea were ignited in December when the bronze statue in honor of these victims was installed across the street from the Japanese Embassy in Seoul. According to Asia Times, May 22, 2012, the Japanese refusal to pay atonement to Korean Comfort Women jeopardized recent military-intelligence and supply-sharing pacts between South Korea and Japan and became a major setback for the strengthening of the U.S.-led alliance in the Asia-Pacific region meant to counter the military expansion of China.



A protest in the Philippines demanding justice for Comfort Women. They want a formal apology and atonement reparations.

There were also tensions in New Jersey. Mayor James Rotundo of Palisades Park, reported that the Japanese consul general, Shigeyuki Hiroki, asked to meet with him. He presented two documents, claiming that the Japanese had recognized and apologized for the comfort women adequately. The women and their advocates do not believe that the Japanese government has, itself, ever provided sufficient formal recognition and issued sincere apologies. The counsel general said that Japan was willing to plant cherry trees in the borough, donate books to the public library, “and do some things to prove that we're united in this world and not divided.” But the offer was contingent on the memorial's removal. Borough officials rejected the request.

A second delegation, this time led by four members of the Japanese Parliament, approached Mayor Rotundo asking that the memorial be removed. According to the Mayor, “They said the Comfort Women were a lie, that they were set up by an outside agency, that they were women who were paid to come and take care of the troops.” Again, the Mayor refused the request.



M. Evelina Galang, creator of Friends of Lolos, in recognition of Comfort Women

The crux of the issue continues to be that the Japanese government refuses to officially acknowledge its role in its crimes by attempting to erase the history of the women, and also refuses to offer atonement reparations directly.

Who knows how this situation will be resolved? Of course, the country of Japan does not want to be known for this part of its history. This is one more nasty aspect of war that lingers on.

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