

Abe and history: words are not enough! by Ralph A. Cossa

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Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo's recent visit to the United States was, by most (but not all) accounts, a success. While some may argue over which words he did or did not use, he essentially told his American audiences what they wanted to hear. In addition to underscoring the vital importance of the US-Japan alliance and his government's commitment to continued peace and prosperity (and to the much-maligned Trans-Pacific Partnership, whose strategic significance was "awesome"), he acknowledged Japan's past sins: "Our actions brought suffering to the peoples in Asian countries. We must not avert our eyes from that. I will uphold the views expressed by the previous prime ministers in this regard." With "deep repentance in my heart," Abe also offered "my eternal condolences to the souls of all American people that were lost during World War II."

During a stop in Boston, in response to a student's question, he even addressed the highly sensitive "comfort women" issue: "My heart aches when I think about the people who were victimized by human trafficking and who were subject to immeasurable pain and suffering, beyond description. On this score my feeling is no different from my predecessor prime ministers." While he regrettably did not specifically mention the Kono Statement – the Aug. 3, 1993 statement by then-Chief Cabinet Secretary Kono Yohei that acknowledged official complicity in the coercion of military sex slaves – it was clear he was (once again) standing behind it and the numerous apologies Japanese leaders have made over the years.

With the trip behind him, attention is now shifting to what Abe will or won't say on the occasion of the 70th anniversary of the end of WWII. There has been a stream of articles providing (usually very good) advice on what that message should include. This is not one of them. Quite frankly, his words, while important, will not be enough. While he could say – or fail to say – some things that could make things considerably worse, finally putting history behind will require some important gesture to underscore and lend credence to the words. The right action *before* the 70th anniversary speech would help create a more positive environment in which to judge his sincerity.

Prime Minister Abe needs to dramatically and definitively address the comfort women issue head on. He has said the right words before; just prior to his trilateral summit with US President Barack Obama and ROK President Park Geun-hye in March of last year, he assured a parliamentary committee that his government would not review or revise the Kono Statement, while further asserting that his Cabinet "upholds

the position on the recognition of history outlined by the previous administrations in its entirety."

If that's truly the case, it's time to do something about it, to prove just how remorseful the Abe government really is. One option would be to offer official compensation to those "who were subject to immeasurable pain and suffering, beyond description."

Tokyo has long argued that all wartime compensation issues between Japan and South Korea were settled under a 1965 bilateral agreement that included a sizable aid and development package which helped to jumpstart the Korean economic miracle. While this may be legally correct (and juries in Korea have a different interpretation than do those in Japan), Japan could and should do more for the remaining Korean comfort women survivors.

History deniers aside, the real hang-up on the Japanese side has always seemed to be more legalistic than factual. Recall that in 1995, Prime Minister Murayama Tomiichi created an independent (government initiated but privately operated) Asian Women's Fund, to provide atonement money to South Korean and other former sex slaves. Many rejected the money, however, reportedly because they wanted official state compensation, and the Fund was eventually disbanded in 2007.

Tokyo remains concerned that providing official compensation could be seen as an acknowledgment of legal responsibility, which would open a floodgate of legal challenges regarding other war-related issues supposedly covered by the 1965 agreement. But Abe could, while still asserting that legal obligations have been met, state that Japan has a special moral obligation to assist the few remaining survivors, nonetheless. He could then make an extraordinary compensation effort through an official government entity using government funds, out of a sense of moral rather than legal obligation, to provide compensation and closure to those long-suffering souls. Acknowledging and stressing Japan's moral responsibility would be a demonstration of Abe's sincerity without opening a legal Pandora's Box. Sending a high-profile woman to Seoul as his personal representative to deliver the first checks would further enhance such a gesture; someone like the prime minister's wife, Abe Akie, or former United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Ogata Sadako or former LDP Defense Minister Koike Yuriko immediately come to mind.

This approach requires some flexibility and leadership from Seoul as well. While it might be asking too much for any Korean leader to endorse Abe's argument that legal issues have all been resolved, at a minimum the Park administration should not openly contest this statement. Instead, President Park should publicly welcome Abe's offer as a significant step forward in finally resolving a difficult issue with the interests

of the long-suffering victims foremost in mind. This would be a win-win for both governments and especially for the comfort women themselves.

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