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By Matsubara Hiroshi and William Underwood

William Underwood

By now it has surely dawned on Japan's political establishment, eager for issues of Japanese war accountability to fade away, that appointing Aso Taro to the post of foreign minister last fall was a major mistake. While Aso's provocative comments about Japanese imperialism and war conduct predated his tenure as the nation's top diplomat, the historical record of forced labor in Japan by Asians and Allied POWs is being newly thrust into the media spotlight.

Thousands of Korean labor conscripts were exploited for dangerous work in the northern Kyushu coalfields owned by Aso Mining Company between 1939 and 1945. Most Korean forced laborers never received the wages they earned; the money was deposited in the national treasury after the war and remains there today. The Aso family's coal profits helped bankroll the rise of the dominant political figure in early postwar Japan, Yoshida Shigeru, who was prime minister when Aso Mining and scores of other Japanese corporations quietly deposited the unpaid wages of some 700,000 Korean labor conscripts. Yoshida was also Aso Taro's grandfather.

The South Korean government's Truth Commission on Forced Mobilization under Japanese Imperialism continues to demand, thus far with limited success, name rosters and data about human remains from Aso Mining's successor company and the other firms. "The corporations' remains survey has been insincere," a Seoul government official charged last November. "It is also strange that the family company of the foreign minister, which should be setting an example, has provided no information whatsoever."

Fukuoka POW Camp 3, pinhole camera photo by Terence Kirk

Japan Focus recently publicized the fact that 300 Allied prisoners of war performed forced labor at Fukuoka POW Camp 26, better known as Aso Mining's Yoshikuma coal pit. A stream of English-language media accounts of the Aso-POW connection followed in Japan, Australia, Canada, France, South Korea, Taiwan, the United States, the United Kingdom—and even Qatar. No Japanese-language media, however, have reported that Allied POWs toiled for the company headed during the 1970s by Aso Taro, even though the foreign minister is a candidate to succeed Koizumi Junichiro as prime minister in September. Aso has not yet replied to a written request for an apology and compensation sent to him in June by the daughter of an 87-year-old Australian man who worked without pay at the Aso Yoshikuma mine in 1945.

The article below, by Matsubara Hiroshi of the Asahi Shimbun, describes Aso's participation in a controversial July 3 memorial service at Juganji temple outside Osaka, in honor of Allied POWs who died in Japanese labor camps. Ambassadors from wartime Allied nations were invited by Aso to participate in an official commemoration, but they were suddenly disinvited over fears that revelations about the foreign minister's own ties to prisoner labor might cause some embassies to skip the service or send only junior staff. Aso ended up attending the ceremony in a private capacity and did not speak, making the event a missed opportunity for advancing the forced labor reparations process—at least for some Western victims. No state commemoration was ever contemplated for Korean and Chinese victims of forced labor in Japan, still less for the millions of nameless "romusha" coerced to labor across the Japanese wartime empire.

The Foreign Ministry shifted into damage control mode regarding the Juganji fiasco during a July 4 press conference, as a transcript available at the ministry's website shows. Aso's spokesman contended that "malicious news reports" were responsible for the service being downsized at the last minute, while implausibly insisting the ministry was never officially involved. Yet not a single media interrogator asked about POWs at Aso Mining, which was the chief reason why the event aroused controversy in the first place. Would Japanese society even care about Allied POW forced labor at a coalmine owned by the foreign minister's family? The answer is unknown, because Japanese media have failed to provide the information needed to form an opinion.

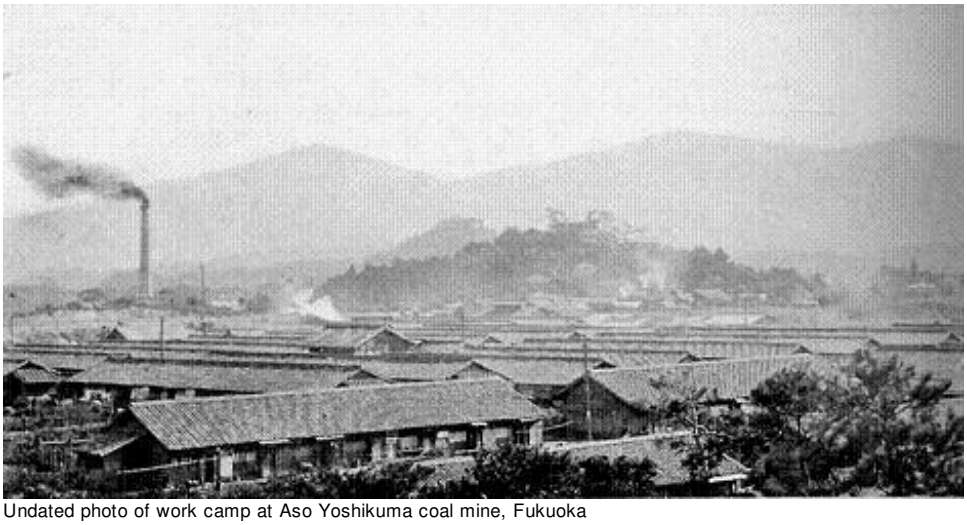
Efforts toward healing and reconciliation are moving forward anyway, in the face of opposition by the Japanese state and corporations. Last May, the annual convention of the American Defenders of Bataan and Corregidor (ADBC) was held in Phoenix, Arizona, and attended by 72 ex-POWs and 300 family members. Keynote speaker Lester Tenney was held at Fukuoka POW Camp 17 and dug coal without pay for the giant Mitsui Company. Tenney's speech (available in PDF format) relates how the fight for compensation in American courts by POW forced laborers ended in failure amid staunch opposition from Washington as well as Tokyo.

Lester Tenney demands apology and compensation in San Francisco, 2001

Former POW and ADBC member Terence Kirk died at age 89 in early May. Kirk secretly used a pinhole camera (photos available) to document the appalling conditions at Fukuoka POW Camp 3, which provided workers for steel mills located not far from the Aso Yoshikuma mine. Duane Heisinger, whose father was killed on a POW hellship late in the war, also died just before the ADBC convention. Heisinger was the driving force behind the Hellships Memorial that was dedicated in the Philippines earlier this year and author of Father Found.

Represented at the Phoenix event were the California-based U.S.-Japan Dialogue on POWs and the Tokyo-based POW Research Network Japan, grassroots groups dedicated to reconciliation. Following inquiries by the former group, the Japanese Embassy in Washington on May 17 clarified the status of the government's "Peace, Friendship and Exchange Initiative." The little-known program, aimed at "facilitating a sincere and honest appraisal of the past and promoting mutual understanding," brings about 40 to 50 British and Dutch ex-POWs or family members to Japan for goodwill visits each year. All other nationalities have thus far been excluded from the program, a reality that Lester Tenney called unfair and may campaign to change.

"While our feelings of deep remorse and heartfelt apology are no different towards British, Dutch and American POWs, the circumstances surrounding the POWs are different with each country and no similar program currently exists for the former American POWs," wrote the Japanese Embassy in response to the inquiry. Redress movements for all classes of forced labor in wartime Japan, far from abating, are being reinvigorated—due in part to the family background of the man now serving as Japan's official face to the world.


Undated photo of work camp at Aso Yoshikuma coal mine, Fukuoka

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Matsubara Hiroshi

HIGASHI-OSAKA, Osaka Prefecture--Foreign Minister Aso Taro on Monday became the first Cabinet member to attend a memorial service for allied prisoners of war at the Juganji temple here.

The facility honors approximately 1,000 POWs who died in World War II camps across Japan.

Notably absent were ambassadors and consuls general who had been invited to attend but were discouraged from going at the last minute. In preparation for his first visit to the temple, Aso invited representatives from several allied nations to join him.

But after media reports expressing skepticism of his political motivations, Aso's office sent out notices late last week informing the invited guests the visit was now purely "private" and that Aso would go alone.

Aso was accompanied by his secretaries and Foreign Ministry officials. He paid a 20-second tribute to the 1,086 POWs of Australia, Britain, Canada, India, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway and the United States whose remains were kept at the temple.

Afterward, Aso said he had wanted to express his gratitude to the temple for honoring the deceased POWs for the past 60 years with little public recognition.

"With gratitude to the priests, I came to pray that the POWs might rest in peace," he said.

About 20 priests, 60 local residents and a nephew of a deceased U.S. POW whose ashes were once held at the temple also attended the service. Foreign embassy officials stayed away as requested.

Aso Iizuka Golf Club, near the former Yoshikuma mine site

After the end of World War II, the Buddhist temple accepted urns containing the cremated remains of 1,086 POWs who had died at a POW camps in Osaka and elsewhere.

Many remains have since been returned to the home countries of the deceased POWs. However, some remains are still kept in the pagoda at the temple, according to priests.

Some of the families of the deceased POWs and several consuls general of the allied nations have visited the temple, which conducts an annual memorial service each Aug. 25.

Konishi Yukio, chief priest at the temple, was clearly overjoyed at this first-ever visit by a Cabinet minister.

"It may have been an unofficial visit but a Cabinet member attended a service for the first time today, and I believe the spirits of the deceased servicemen must be relieved," Konishi said.

Aso first expressed a wish to attend a remembrance service at the temple shortly after assuming his ministerial post in October. His office then contacted the temple in March and it was agreed that the remembrance service would be moved to Monday to fit in with Aso's schedule, his secretary said.

Aso's office invited ambassadors and consuls general to the service through the Foreign Ministry in June. Several were planning to attend.

However, the mood changed late last month after both domestic and foreign media questioned Aso's intentions in visiting the temple. There was speculation his visit was aimed at deflecting criticism of Japan's failure to fully address the POW issue and also to soften Aso's hawkish image overseas.

A British Embassy spokesman confirmed that Ambassador Graham Fry had initially planned to attend, but along with the other foreign dignitaries invited, canceled last Friday after receiving notice from Aso's office.

"Aso's attendance at the service has no motivation behind it. We just wanted to avoid causing any trouble or inconvenience for the embassies," Aso's secretary said.

"His attendance has already been highly politicized by the media, and Aso apparently decided not to cause further turmoil by involving ambassadors," said a senior Foreign Ministry official who accompanied his boss on Monday.

Juganji temple near Osaka

But the decision to label the visit as private disappointed some. John Glusman, the 50-year-old son of an American POW who published his father's memoir Conduct Under Fire last year, canceled after being told the foreign minister's visit was purely private.

Glusman said he had been invited to attend the service by a senior Foreign Ministry official in April. Having heard that allied ambassadors and consuls general were also attending, Glusman said he thought there would be an official event during which Aso might make a statement addressing the POW issue.

"I thought it would be a wonderful opportunity to open the possibility (for Japan) to address this delicate issue, but the event was minimized from a public event to a private one," Glusman said. "The Foreign Ministry realized that it is a far more complicated issue than it had initially thought."

The government's official position remains that the treatment of POWs during the war has been settled by Japan's compensation to allied nations in line with the 1951 San Francisco Treaty.

Matsubara Hiroshi is an Asahi Shimbun Staff Writer.
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