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Japan's Wartime Sex Slave Exhibition Exposes Darkness in East Timor

By STEPHANIE COOP

Ines de Jesus was a young girl during World War II when she was forced to become a sex slave, or "comfort woman," for Japanese troops in the then Portuguese colony of East Timor.

1. Exhibition on the abuses inflicted on East Timorese women during the Japanese and Indonesian occupations. A visitor at the Women's Active Museum on War and Peace in Tokyo's Shinjuku Ward looks at panels that describe the abuses inflicted on East Timorese women during the Japanese and Indonesian occupations. KAWASAKI SATOKO PHOTO

By day, de Jesus carried out various kinds of menial labor, and each night was raped by between four to eight Japanese soldiers at a so-called comfort station in Oat village in the western province of Bobonaro.

While horrific, de Jesus' experience with sexual abuse under military occupation is by no means unusual among East Timorese women, as a special exhibition at the Women's Active Museum on War and Peace in Tokyo's Shinjuku Ward makes clear.

The exhibition combines testimony from survivors and witnesses with photos and other documentary evidence to provide a compelling picture of the various forms of gender-based violence inflicted on women during two particularly black periods in East Timor's history: the 1942-1945 takeover by Japanese troops, and the 24-year occupation by Indonesian forces that ended in 1999, after a U.N.-sponsored referendum on independence.

Systematic investigation of the atrocities committed during these periods was impossible under Indonesian rule, but since 1999 scholars, human rights groups and a U.N.-sponsored East Timorese truth commission have attempted to uncover the facts.

The exhibition is based partly on the results of a joint project conducted by Japanese and East Timorese human rights groups into the Japanese military's sex-slave system in East Timor. It includes a map showing the locations of the 21 comfort stations the project team has identified to date.

Furusawa Kiyoko, an associate professor of development and gender studies at Tokyo Woman's Christian University and one of the organizers of the project and exhibition, said that after the Japanese landed in East Timor in February 1942 to oust a contingent of Australian troops that had entered the neutral territory the previous December, it ordered "liurai" (traditional rulers) and village heads to supply women to serve the troops.

Some of those who refused to comply were executed.

"Women enslaved in comfort stations were forced to serve many soldiers every night, while others were treated as the personal property of particular officers," she said. "Some women were specifically targeted for enslavement because their husbands were suspected of aiding the Australian troops.

"As well as being physically and psychologically traumatized by the sexual abuse, the women were also made to work at tasks such as building roads, cutting wood, growing and preparing food, and doing laundry during the day, so they were constantly exhausted. They were also forced to dance and were taught Japanese songs to entertain soldiers," Furusawa said.

Comfort women received no payment for their work and little or no food, she added. Family members either brought food to the comfort stations or the women were sent home to obtain it.

There was little likelihood of women trying to escape at such times, she explained. "There were around 12,000 Japanese troops in a country with a population of only about 463,000, so the whole island was like an open prison. There was nowhere for the women to go, and at any rate, they were terrified about reprisals against their families if they did try to escape."

Gender-based violence was also rampant during the Indonesian occupation that began in 1975 and continued for a quarter century, with the East Timorese truth commission finding that East Timorese women were subjected to widespread rape, sexual slavery and various forms of sexual torture -- 93.3 percent of which was perpetrated by Indonesian soldiers or Indonesian-backed militias.

Sexual abuse occurred almost as a matter of course when women were detained by Indonesian authorities.

In her testimony displayed at the exhibition, Fatima Guterres, who participated actively in resistance activities before being captured by Indonesian troops, states that all the women in the prison where she was subsequently incarcerated were raped.

"When the soldiers there interrogated us, they didn't ask us anything about our political activities. All they were interested in was sex, sex, sex," Guterres said.

"We were always 'questioned' at night. After one session finished we would be told to go back to our cell and sleep, but then another soldier would appear and tell us to report to another officer's room. We knew what would happen . . . every night it was the same thing, over and over," she said.

Despite the gravity of the human-rights abuses documented in the exhibition, justice has yet to be achieved for the survivors.

Japan's system of sexual slavery was largely ignored in the war crimes trials conducted by the Allies after World War II, and a special court established by Indonesia to punish the atrocities committed by its troops and militias in 1999 failed to get a single rape indictment.

U.N. prosecutors indicted some members of the Indonesian military and its militias for complicity in sexual violence as a crime against humanity, but Indonesia has refused to extradite the suspects to stand trial in East Timor.

Citizen groups concerned about the lack of accountability for the wartime sex-slave atrocities convened a citizens tribunal in Tokyo in 2000 that found the late Emperor Hirohito and high-ranking Japanese military officers guilty of crimes against humanity. The verdict was later censored from an NHK documentary on the trial amid allegations by a major daily newspaper that two heavyweight Liberal Democratic Party politicians -- Nakagawa Shoichiand Abe Shinzo -- paid a less than comfortable visit to the public broadcaster before it was aired.

Furusawa said that while the tribunal helped restore some dignity to victims by publicly acknowledging that the acts they were subjected to constituted violations of international law, only an official apology and compensation from the Japanese government will satisfy the survivors' demands for justice.

The government should also press the Indonesian government to prosecute those who harmed East Timorese women during its occupation, she added.

Logo of the Citizens' Tribunal

"Many survivors and witnesses have already passed away, so it's imperative that the government act quickly. We hope the exhibition will help raise awareness about this issue and lead to justice for all the victims."

"East Timorese Women Speak Out: Sexual Violence Under Japanese and Indonesian Occupation" runs until May 27 at the Women's Active Museum on War and Peace, AVACO Bldg., 2F, Nishi-Waseda 2-3-18, Shinjuku Ward, Tokyo 169-0051. For further information, call (03) 3202-4633 or visit their website.

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See Yoshiko Nozaki, The "Comfort Women" Controversy: History and Testimony.

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