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Japan's Military "Comfort Women" System

Congressional Research Service

On April 9, the Congressional Research Service (CRS) released a report on the military comfort women, which Japan Focus presents here in full. Much of the report's content will not be new to Focus readers. The research and reporting of scholars and journalists such as Yoshimi Yoshiaki, Yuki Tanaka, Sarah Soh, George Hicks, and Norimitsu Onishi contribute much to author Larry Nikch's findings. But the report also draws extensively on responses to the issues by the Yomiuri Shimbun, Sankei Shimbun, Asahi Shimbun and other Japanese newspapers as well as successive Japanese government press conferences illustrative of the official disarray in the face of US Congressional pressures on the eve of Prime Minister Abe Shinzo's first visit to the US since taking office. It also provides an extensive record of the Japanese government's official handling of the comfort women issues, including apologies and unofficial reparations over a fifteen year period.

The CRS report is above all significant because it stands now as America's official knowledge on the comfort women's history. Given its tenor, this is staggering and also helps explain why South Korean news agencies among others have been collectively jumping up and down for joy that the CRS "rebutted" Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo's series of denials during March 2007.

The Congressional Research Service is the "the public policy research arm of the United States Congress... work(ing) exclusively and directly for Members of Congress, their Committees and staff on a confidential, nonpartisan basis." It began in 1914 and was reorganized in 1970 as a branch agency of the Library of Congress. In simplest terms, it is a taxpayer-funded think-tank whose 800 employees issue about 3000 briefs and position papers to congress each year, that have ranged in recent weeks from "Pakistan and Terrorism" (March 27, 2007) to "Alcohol Use Among Youth" (April 2, 2007) and now "Japanese Military's 'Comfort Women' System."

The reason that Congress suddenly requested a report about comfort women, of course, is the international fracas generated by Prime Minister Abe's March 1, 2007 statement denying that the Japanese government "coerced" the women involved in the system. Abe's gaffe was itself prompted by California democrat Mike Honda's proposed non-binding resolution calling on the government of Japan to apologize for the comfort women (HR 121). Importantly, Abe and his supporters' series of denials, and denials of denials, made many who once opposed the resolution to do an about face, and the bill now has about 80 signatures. Unlike prior bills along similar lines, this one is has good prospects of success, yet Honda and co-sponsors will wait until after Abe's scheduled April 26-27 visit to Washington to bring it to a floor vote in mid-May.

In the meantime, however, the CRS report will have congressional representatives or at least their staffers mulling over several related issues that the report raises that may have much larger ramifications for U.S.-Japan relations than the resolution alone. For example, the report wonders whether Abe's denial indicates that the current government of Japan is in open defiance of the San Francisco Treaty. It also questions the logic of Japan's stance on the abduction issue with North Korea. Again, while such assertions may not surprise Focus readers, even raising these issues could yield pronounced changes in the relationship between Washington and Tokyo. Alexis Dudden

Posted at Japan Focus on April 11, 2007.

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