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By William Underwood

One year after media reports that Aso Mining used 300 Allied prisoners of war for forced labor in 1945, Foreign Minister Aso Taro is refusing to confirm that POWs dug coal for his family's company—and even challenging reporters to produce evidence.

That is not hard to do. Records produced by both Aso Mining and the Japanese government clearly show that POWs toiled at the Aso Yoshikuma mine in Fukuoka Prefecture.

But the Foreign Ministry's provocative stance raises questions about Japan's commitment to historical reconciliation even with current Western allies. It also highlights the growing tendency of the Japanese state to contest criticism of the nation's wartime past, as the government moves to revise the no-war clause of Japan's constitution and promote patriotic education.

Last year's flurry of media coverage reflected the nationalities of the World War II prisoners involved: 197 Australian, 101 British and two Dutch.



Dangerous conditions at the Mitsui Miike coal mine in Fukuoka and Allied POWs in Japan after liberation (U.S. National Archives)

Newspaper stories in *The Australian*, *The Age* and *The Sydney Morning Herald* were supplemented by newscasts by the Australian Broadcasting Corp. British readers were informed by *The Guardian*, *The Observer*, *The Times* and *The Telegraph*. Survivors of forced labor at the Aso Yoshikuma coal mine were tracked down and interviewed.

An 87-year-old Australian sent a personal letter to Foreign Minister Aso, according to *The Japan Times*. The former POW received no reply to his request for an apology and compensation for his unpaid work for Aso Mining Co.

Japanese-language media have treated the existence of the Aso Yoshikuma labor camp, formally known as Fukuoka POW Branch Camp 26, as a virtual taboo. Aso Taro has avoided all public comment on the matter.

But when a *New York Times* reporter mentioned forced labor at Aso Mining in an article last November, the Foreign Ministry issued a startling public rebuttal. According to the [website](#) of the Consulate-General of Japan in New York:

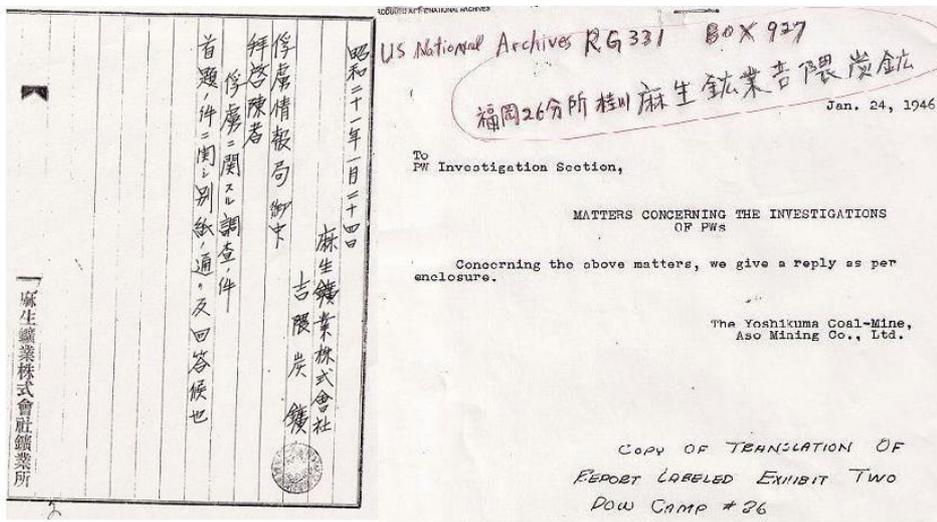
"The Government of Japan is not in a position to comment on employment forms and conditions of a private company, Aso Mining, at that time. However, our government has not received any information the company has used forced laborers. It is totally unreasonable to make this kind of judgmental description without presenting any evidence."

This attitude was criticized by Linda Goetz Holmes, a Pacific War historian and author of a [book](#) on POW forced labor called *Unjust Enrichment*. Proof that Aso Mining exploited prisoner labor originated with the Japanese government in the immediate postwar period, she noted.

"The Ministry of Foreign Affairs is continuing the disturbing Japanese government trend of being unwilling to search its own archives for the corroborating evidence of POW slave labor," Holmes said. "Instead, it is challenging others to produce such records."

On Aug. 19, 1945, the imperial Japanese government's Committee to Negotiate Surrender delivered to U.S. Army Gen. Douglas MacArthur, by hand in Manila, a list of prison camps in Japan and the names of private companies using Allied POWs. The Fukuoka section of the document shows the Camp 26 workforce was assigned to Aso's Yoshikuma colliery. This POW camp list can be found today in the MacArthur Memorial Archives in Virginia (Record Group 4, Box 23).

"If copies of that document exist in the MacArthur Memorial Archives, they surely exist in Japanese archives as well," said Holmes, who served as a history adviser to the Japanese Imperial Records Interagency Working Group (IWG). Affiliated with the U.S. National Archives, the IWG recently concluded its work and issued a 1,700-page [guide](#) called *Researching Japanese War Crimes*.



Cover pages of the January 1946 report Aso Mining submitted to Japanese government. The Japanese version uses company stationery and bears an official seal (U.S. National Archives)

Throughout the postwar period Japanese corporations have engaged in “multi-pronged denials” of forced labor, according to Holmes. She said companies tore down and bulldozed over all traces of POW barracks “as fast as they were able,” and then falsely told American inspectors they had destroyed all records at the direction of the Japanese government.

“In fact,” Holmes said, “each company retained complete lists and often photographs of each POW, along with information such as his country of origin and serial number.”

1946 ASO REPORT

But in the aftermath of the nation’s unconditional surrender, the Japanese government and industry were in no position to completely stonewall the victorious Allies. Occupation authorities soon ordered the Japanese government to formally document the massive forced labor enterprise, and the worst atrocities against POWs would be vigorously prosecuted at war crimes tribunals.

Japanese authorities, in turn, directed each company involved to prepare written responses to a set list of questions about POW working and living conditions. Individual company reports were submitted to the Japanese government, which compiled them and later submitted a comprehensive “master report” to American military investigators in Tokyo.

(Also in 1945-46, Japan’s Foreign Ministry similarly directed companies to submit extensive records concerning forced labor in Japan by Chinese nationals, many of them undeclared prisoners of war. War crimes against Chinese forced laborers were for the most part not prosecuted, however. The Japanese government suppressed the so-called Foreign Ministry Report and lied to the Diet about its existence, which was finally confirmed in 1993. Tokyo today describes the Chinese labor program as “half-forced.”)



1933 photo of coal sorting equipment at Aso Yoshikuma mine in Keisen town, Fukuoka (Kyushu University Digital Archives)

On Jan. 24, 1946, Aso Mining submitted a 16-page report detailing conditions at Yoshikuma to the Japanese government’s POW Information Bureau, using company stationery and attaching an English translation.

This Aso company report claims the Westerners were fed, clothed and housed better than Aso’s Japanese workers and Korean labor conscripts. On paper at least, POWs received a “main food” of 715 grams per day (compared to 570 grams or less for other workers) and were “satisfied with the completeness of the mess provisions.”

Aso Mining also wrote that 150 of the healthiest Camp 26 prisoners were utilized in the third sector of the Yoshikuma mine. The remainder performed farm work and camp tasks like cooking and digging bomb shelters. The POWs were said to have been the best farmers, but only half as efficient as Japanese or Koreans in the coal pits.

The Aso report includes the company’s Feb. 22, 1945, letter to the Japan War Ministry requesting use of 300 Allied prisoners for one year. Camp 26 opened on May 10, fulfilling the Aso request. The company provided an itemized list of camp construction expenses totaling 211,426 yen.

These key records produced by Aso Mining in January 1946 can be viewed in Maryland at the U.S. National Archives (Record Group 331, Box 927).

The U.S. National Archives also retain the comprehensive Camp Management Report, submitted to American war crimes investigators by the Japan POW Information Bureau on June 7, 1946. It further confirms the “Aso Mining Industry Company” utilized the Camp 26 prisoners in the adjacent Yoshikuma coal mine.

First-Hand Witness

Arthur Gigger, now 86 and living in South Australia, recalled 12-hour shifts and “pretty primitive conditions” deep in the Aso mine. He arrived at Camp 26 after American firebombing destroyed the Kobe shipyard where he had worked since late 1942. He became a POW when Singapore fell to Japanese forces.

“The food was certainly meager, but clothing was our biggest problem,” Gigger said. “We were down to absolute tatters by the end of the war. I don’t think we’d have seen it through another winter.” The Aso-compiled records, however, say the prisoners’ clothing was of superior quality.



Former Aso prisoner Arthur Gigger in 1940, two years before the fall of Singapore, and in 2006 (Ian Millard)

Gigger disputed other aspects of Aso Mining’s description of life at Camp 26. While the company reported that prisoners could “take a rest in the recreation room,” Gigger insisted “there was no such thing.”

The company report also claims that, shortly after Japan’s surrender, prisoners thanked Aso officials for their kind treatment by giving them gifts. “That’s all bull,” Gigger said with a laugh. “Absolute rubbish.”

Despite its often self-exculpatory nature, such evidence of forced labor at Aso Mining exists in the national archives of other Allied countries—and in Japan. Produced by American Occupation staff based on Japanese company reports, a copy of the “Roster of Deceased Allied POWs in Japan Proper” resides at the National Diet Library in Tokyo.

The roster records the names of the two Australian soldiers who died at Aso Yoshikuma: John Watson and Leslie Edgar George Wilkie. It is accessible online at the [website](#) of the POW Research Network Japan, run by Japanese citizens working to clarify the historical record. The remains of Watson and Wilkie are interred at the Commonwealth War Cemetery near Yokohama.

Another U.S. government document in the National Diet Library is Report No. 174, issued by the Investigation Division of GHQ’s Legal Section on Feb. 1, 1946.

This report summarizes a two-day U.S. Army inspection of the Camp 26 site, referring to the statement of an Aso company official as “Exhibit One.” The document also lists the names and ranks of Japanese Army personnel who guarded the POWs when they were not in Aso Mining’s custody. All camp records were burned in late September 1945, it notes.

While there were no charges of war crimes involving Camp 26, the paper trail for prisoner labor at Yoshikuma is clearly extensive. A 1982 book published by Japan’s National Defense Academy also states that the camp’s prisoners worked for Aso Mining.



The Commonwealth War Cemetery near Yokohama contains the remains of nearly 300 Australian servicemen (Australian Embassy in Japan)

Yet at the peak of overseas media coverage of the Aso-POW connection last July, a Foreign Ministry spokesperson appeared to dispute wartime events. The ministry official lashed out during a [press conference](#) at “malicious news reports that contained statements contrary to facts and nevertheless have aroused a lot of debate precisely because they were very farfetched.”

Contemporary Context

Japan’s prime minister, Abe Shinzo, provoked international controversy more recently by doubting the evidence of government or military coercion in Japan’s wartime system of military sexual slavery. A non-binding resolution debated by the U.S. Congress in spring 2007 calls on the Japanese government to “formally acknowledge and apologize for” the comfort women system—and to refute revisionists who deny the historical reality.

That could include Foreign Minister Aso, who last February described the congressional resolution as “not based on objective facts.” Aso, 66, finished second to Abe in last year’s contest for prime minister and still aspires to the nation’s top post.

Founded in 1872, the family firm had ceased mining and was known as Aso Cement when Aso Taro headed it in the 1970s. It is called Aso Group today and is run by Aso’s younger brother. Few traces of the Yoshikuma mine remain, although the Aso Iizuka Golf Club is located near the former site.

Dozens of compensation lawsuits were filed over the past decade against Japanese corporations that profited from forced labor during WWII. All have now failed. Courts in Japan, the United States and elsewhere have held that the San Francisco Peace Treaty and other postwar accords waived the rights of victims to seek legal redress.

Hundreds of thousands of Nazi-era forced laborers and their heirs, by contrast, have received billions of dollars in compensation from the German and Austrian governments and corporate sectors since 2000. Formal apologies and educational initiatives were major components of those reparations programs.

Whereas Japan often appears stuck at the stage of historical truth telling, German President Johannes Rau displayed his nation’s commitment to reconciliation with individual war victims when the Foundation for Remembrance, Responsibility and the Future was established by the German parliament in July 2000.

“I know that for many it is not really money that matters,” Rau said. “What they want is for their suffering to be recognized as suffering and for the injustice done to them to be named injustice. I pay tribute to all those who were subjected to slave labor under German rule and, in the name of the German people, beg forgiveness. We will not forget their suffering.”

“Remembrance Preserved: Third Reich Slave and Forced Labor from Poland 1939-1945” is the name of a historical exhibition that opened in May 2007 at a preserved labor camp barracks in Berlin. The [exhibit](#) will be moved to other German cities this fall, having already toured 30 cities in Poland. Researchers are now being allowed full access to Germany’s millions of archival records on WWII forced labor in Europe.

Application for Permission to use PW labor

Feb. 22, 1945.

To
General Gen Sugiyama, the minister of war,

I would like to apply for permission to use PW campregularly.

Hanji Hangata(Agent of Yoshikuma
Coal Mine)
Yoshikuma 12, Katsurakawa street,
Kaho-gun, Fukuoka-ken.

1. Number of prisoners: 300
2. Place where prisoners will be used: Yoshikuma Coal, Katsurakawa Street, Kahogun, Fukuoka-ken
3. Type of work: Coal-mine labor
4. Housing provided for the prisoners: Special buildings were used. Details shown on the attached sheet.
5. Guards for prisoners: Guards to supervise the work were assigned by order of the camp commander.
6. Instructions given prisoners: The prisoners received the instructions from the commander and the supervisor directed the work.
7. Wages of prisoners: One yen(average), but if PW was engaged in technical work, 35 sen was added to the 1 yen.
8. Work hour: 12 hours per day
9. The length of time PW labor will be used: One year..

The 1946 Aso report includes the company's February 1945 "Application for Permission to Use PW Labor" (U.S. National Archives)

The Japanese government should "take immediate action to bring about an honorable closure to the history of Japan's wartime forced labor," according to Kinue Tokudome, director of US-Japan Dialogue on POWs. The California-based non-profit [organization](#) promotes reconciliation on a humanitarian basis.

"As Japan's top diplomat and because of his family background, Foreign Minister Aso should be more sensitive to this issue and more willing to resolve it," Tokudome said. "No conscientious politician would just wait to receive the information that his family coal mine enslaved POWs and Asian civilians."

In the late 1990s the Australian government paid \$25,000 in compensation to Arthur Gigger and other Australian prisoners of the Japanese. The United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Canada, New Zealand, Norway, Singapore and even the Isle of Man have similarly used domestic funds to compensate former POWs held by Japan. The United States has not, due to adamant opposition from the executive branch.

Gigger, long active in ex-POW groups in Australia and retired from a customs service career, said he has no animosity toward Japan. But he called on the Foreign Ministry to stop denying the reality of forced labor at Aso Mining.

"I know it happened," Gigger said. "I was there."

William Underwood is a faculty member at Kurume Institute of Technology and a Japan Focus coordinator. He recently completed his doctoral dissertation at Kyushu University on forced labor in wartime Japan. He can be reached at kyushubill@yahoo.com. This is an expanded version of an article published in the Japan Times on May 29, 2007. Posted at Japan Focus on May 28, 2007.

- (3) What was demanded by the manager of the main office and the branch office, as to the medical consultation?

There was no demand for equipment, but as to medicines, whenever we ran short of them, replenishment had been done as shown in the annexed list.

- (4) What do you know about the number of patients among the prisoners, and how much they weighed?

The number of patients was always unstable. I can say it was at about the maximum of 20 to the minimum of 10 persons. As for body-weight, I don't know.

- (5) The percentage of death and illness was influenced by the climate and other natural conditions and the labor service assigned to them in different localities. How about these matters?

Two men died. These men were in the hospital when they arrived at our mine. So, it seems to me that their deaths were not caused by the influences above mentioned. Four patients requiring surgical treatment were caused by labor services but these cases were not serious.

- (6) As to the matters above referred, what had been done by you to work co-operately with the authorities of PW camp, so as to keep the health of all prisoners?

The healthiest men worked underground, the next ones cultivated farm yard which was provided to supply food for them, the weakest did light jobs in the factory. We classified them like this, according to the condition of their health, at times we alternated them around. In such a way, we always paid proper attention to their health.

- (7) Mention the circumstances virtually by what means did the manager of the branch office and his subordinates paid attention directly to keep the prisoners' health.

Just after their arrival to our mines, we made a health investigation and capacity inquiry. From the standpoint of health, we classified the jobs. Every month we made body weight investigation. At times we examined their discharges and blood (i.e. the degree of blood sinking) etc.

V (1) How about the labor condition?

Location	Type of work	Number of laborers
Yoshikuma 3rd mine 3rd "Oroshi"	Coal Mining	150
The 1st Farm Yard	Cultivation	80
The 2nd Farm Yard	Keeping farmyard in order	5
In the PW camp	Digging air raid shelter	10
ditto	Miscellaneous	15
ditto	Cooking	9

Page five of the Aso company report, stating that 150 POWs worked in section three of the Yoshikuma mine (U.S. National Archives)

Previous Japan Focus articles about forced labor at Aso Mining:

[Family Skeletons: Japan's Foreign Minister and Forced Labor by Koreans and Allied POWs](#), by Christopher Reed

[Japan Foreign Minister's Visit to POW Remembrance Service Backfires](#), by Matsubara Hiroshi

Previous Japan Focus articles by William Underwood about forced labor in Japan:

[Chinese Forced Labor, the Japanese Government and the Prospects for Redress](#)

[Mitsubishi, Historical Revisionism and Japanese Corporate Resistance to Chinese Forced Labor Redress](#)

[NHK's Finest Hour: Japan's Official Record of Chinese Forced Labor](#)

[Names, Bones and Unpaid Wages \(1\): Reparations for Korean Forced Labor in Japan](#)

[Names, Bones and Unpaid Wages \(2\): Seeking Redress for Korean Forced Labor](#)