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A story broke last week that was noted by the foreign media but not dealt with in great detail in South Korea. The Japanese government acknowledged "for the first time" that in the late stages of the Pacific War, 300 Allied prisoners-of-war were forced into labor at a coal mine affiliated with Aso Mining, which has been run for generations by the family of Japanese Prime Minister Aso Taro.

According to documents released Dec 18 by Fujita Yukihisa, a Democratic Party member of the House of Councillors in the Japanese Diet, a total of 101 British prisoners, 197 Australians and two Dutch were forced to work at the Yoshikuma coal mine POW branch camp in Fukuoka Prefecture for three months beginning in May 1945.

Fujita Yukihisa with Ibuki Yuka (left) and Kinue Tokudome of the U.S.-Japan Dialogue on POWs

Researchers and the prisoners themselves have long made claims of Allied POWs being forced into coal mine work, but the Japanese government has consistently denied them. When the International Herald Tribune published a piece on lawsuits for compensation of Chinese forced laborers two years ago, and reported it in that Aso Mining had forced Asians and Western Europeans into labor, the Japanese consul general in New York posted on the Internet -- at the direction of Aso, then Minister for Foreign Affairs -- that making such claims without evidence was "unreasonable." This argument is said to have discreetly vanished not long ago.

Aso Yoshikuma mine in Kyushu in a 1933 photograph

The astonishing thing is that the documents related to Allied POWs at Aso Mining were left for over 50 years in an underground storage space at the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare. Officials at that ministry were forced to hand over the documents when Fujita insistently demanded that they do so, with the House of Councillors having changed to an opposition party-dominated system. In response to the belated revelation, an official said, "We didn't examine them because they weren't cases." For years, officials of the Liberal Democratic Party

administrations have unconditionally denied the existence of materials proving the misdeeds of colonial rule and aggressive war, and when victims or related nations have raised the issue, the administrations have avoided it and said that there was no verifiable data.

If they behave this way even on the issue of forced labor of Allied POWs, it would be fruitless to expect any correction of historical mistakes through the Japanese government's revelation of materials on the forced labor of Koreans. As long as the current LDP administration does not back down, at least, the possibility of any true reckoning of the past by Japan must be viewed as zero. The people who suffered the most in the Aso family's coal mines during the Japanese Empire were the Koreans. A study by the Research Team for the Truth on Forced Korean Labor in Japan, made up of Japanese scholars and lawyers, showed that the number of draftees at Aso Mining, 10,623 people, was several dozen times the number of Allied POWs. It is said that of the three coal mining companies in the Fukuoka region at the time, the Aso family's business was the harshest in all areas of wages, work environment and labor supervision.

A fire broke out on January 25, 1936, within the Yoshikuma mine, where the Allied POWs would later be engaged in forced labor. The owners, in order to prevent the flames from spreading to the coal seam, hurriedly sealed up the mine. After the flames were extinguished, 29 bodies were found in the mine gallery, 25 of them the bodies of Koreans. The fingernails of these workers, who worked in the most dangerous part of the mine, were torn completely away as though they had been scrambling around through the shaft looking for the exit, it has been reported. In October 1973, the Aso Iizuka Golf Club opened on the former site of the mine. Prime Minister Aso is the current chairman. This means that Aso, a man who once competed on the Olympic shooting team and who prides himself on his golf handicap, enjoys golfing on a site bearing a bloody history.

A mountain of copies of a book called The Fiction of Forced Korean Labor, edited by Aso's closest aides, is said to be stacked up at a bookstore in Iizuka, the electoral district where Aso has been elected nine times. (Sekai, January 2009)

There is even the painful spectacle of Japanese LDP Diet members communicating opinions to the Korean Embassy in Tokyo requesting that the Lee Myung-bak administration reconsider its moves to incapacitate South Korea's past history Presidential Truth Commissions. They are asking President Lee and the lawmakers who jointly presented the bill to merge and abolish the Truth Commissions: Are you on the side of Prime Minister Aso?

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This column appeared at Hankyoreh on December 24, 2008 and at Japan Focus on December 29, 2008.

For more on Aso mining and Korean and POW forced labor see

William Underwood, Names, Bones and Unpaid Wages (1): Reparations for Korean Forced Labor in Japan, The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus, September 10, 2006.

William Underwood, Names, Bones and Unpaid Wages (2): Seeking Redress for Korean Forced Labor, The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus, September 17, 2006.

William Underwood, New Era for Japan-Korea History Issues: Forced Labor Redress Efforts Begin to Bear Fruit, The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus, March 8, 2008.

Recommended citation: Kim Hyo-sun, "Allied and Korean Forced Labor at the Aso Mining Company and Japan-South Korea Relations," The Asia-Pacific Journal, Vol 1-1-09, December 29, 2008.

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