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Japan Resists Call to Apologize for War Practice

By [MARTIN FACKLER](#)

TOKYO, March 5 — Prime Minister [Shinzo Abe](#) said today that if the United States Congress demands that Japan apologize for his nation's use of foreign women as sexual slaves during World War II, his government will refuse to comply.

Japan has already lobbied hard against a resolution now under consideration in the [United States House of Representatives](#), which would call on Tokyo to take clearer responsibility for the Japanese army's enslavement of about 200,000 women, mostly Korean or Chinese, who were euphemistically called comfort women.

Japan has apologized over the matter before, including in 1993. But there are widespread concerns that Mr. Abe and other conservative Japanese lawmakers may try to water down or reverse such public admissions of guilt, as part of a broader push to change the way the nation regards its wartime history.

Speaking in Japan's parliament, Mr. Abe reiterated the position of conservative scholars here that Japanese soldiers and government officials had no hand in forcing women into brothels during the war; they say that private contractors hired by the Japan's military were to blame.

Former comfort women have testified before a House committee that they were kidnapped by Japanese soldiers to serve in military brothels. But Mr. Abe said that any such testimony was "a complete fabrication."

He also criticized the proposed House resolution, which holds Japanese authorities responsible for the coercion, saying that it "was not based in objective fact, and does not consider the Japanese government's measures so far."

Political analysts said that because the House resolution, if passed, would be nonbinding, Tokyo would not be likely to cause any important diplomatic problems with its main ally, the United States, by simply ignoring it. But Japanese diplomats worry that Mr. Abe or other Japanese politicians could overreact to it, and make claims that reinforce the perception in the United States and elsewhere that Japan remains unrepentant for its wartime aggression, analysts said.

"It just looks bad for the prime minister to be getting involved in these sorts of historical details," said Minoru Morita, a political analyst who runs an independent research consultancy in Tokyo. "Plus, his argument isn't going to sway world opinion anyway. Even if the military wasn't pointing guns at the women, they still could have been coerced."

In an apparent nod to such concerns, Mr. Abe appeared to pull back from a comment he made last week, denying that the women had been forced to work in brothels at all. He told parliament today that he supported a 1993 Japanese government statement acknowledging that the military had at least an indirect

role in forcing the women into sexual slavery.

That statement also included an apology to the women. And it set up a government-backed fund to compensate them. The fund is due to expire this month.

“There probably was not anyone who followed that path because they wanted to follow it,” Mr. Abe said, speaking of the women in the military brothels. “In the broad sense, there was coercion.”

With this limited concession, Mr. Abe appeared to be trying to defuse a growing diplomatic row with Japan’s Asian neighbors over his remarks last week, which outraged officials and women’s groups across the region. As surveys show his approval rating falling among Japanese voters, Mr. Abe can ill afford to be seen as unnecessarily provoking China and South Korea, much less undermining ties with the United States, political analysts and opposition lawmakers said.

“If Japan doesn’t apologize and repent for its past violations of human rights, won’t it lose international trust?” Toshio Ogawa, a legislator from the opposition Democratic Party, asked Mr. Abe during the parliamentary debate today.

Still, merely accepting the 1993 statement is something of a compromise on the part of Mr. Abe, who has built his political reputation in part on calls for greater national pride and assertiveness and a reconsideration of Japan’s wartime history. He has led a group of lawmakers within the ruling Liberal Democratic Party who want to modify the 1993 statement, which they say inaccurately casts the actions of Japanese soldiers in a negative light.

Mr. Morita and others said Mr. Abe’s promise today not to comply with the House resolution appeared to be an attempt to appease his conservative base without repudiating the 1993 statement.

But by insisting that the coercion in the military brothels was not the work of officials or the military, Mr. Abe is effectively dismissing as liars the aging women who have come forward with tearful testimony about their ordeals — a stance with public-relations risks of its own.

One of the women is Lee Yong-soo, 78, a South Korean who testified in the House last month that she had been kidnapped by Japanese soldiers at the age of 16 and had been raped repeatedly at an army brothel. In a news conference last week in Tokyo, she said Japanese soldiers dragged her from her home with her mouth covered so that she could not call to her mother for help.

“I want Japan and the Japanese prime minister to apologize,” she said. “As a victim who was forcibly taken, as someone who lived through those events, I’m a living witness.”

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