

The Activities of the Asian Women's Fund in 1995—2006

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It was in the early 1990s that the issue of so-called comfort women came to light, first in South Korea, and later in Japan. The Miyazawa Cabinet responded quickly and started a governmental investigation of documents and materials regarding the comfort women issue in December 1991. In Seoul interviews of sixteen Korean victims were done by envoys of the Japanese government. As a result, Chief Cabinet Secretary Yohei Kono issued an official statement on the comfort women issue on 4 August 1993. The understandings and judgments of this statement proved to be the position of the Japanese government which had been inherited by all following cabinets from Hosokawa's to Abe's. They also laid the foundation for the activities of the coming Asian Women's Fund.

The task to study how to express the apologies and remorse of the government and people was taken up by the coalition government headed by Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama. On 14 June 1995 a new decision was made public by Chief Cabinet Secretary Kozo Igarashi. A fund was to be set up to atone for those women made to be comfort women and to defend the dignity of women in contemporary situation. Its board of directors and advisory committee were established officially on 19 July 1995 and the National Fund for Asian Peace and Women (Asian Women's Fund) was born. This was a foundation set up by the government to implement government policy and funded by the government, but in its proponents, board directors and members of advisory committee, all unpaid volunteers worked with a few salaried officials.

First on 15 August 1995 the Prime Minister's statement regarding the Fund and the Fund proponents' "Appeal for Donations for the Asian Women's Fund were published in full-page advertisements in the morning editions of six national newspapers. There a slogan "The government and the people will cooperate for the Fund" stood out. These full-page advertisements on the very day of the 50th anniversary of the end of the war declared the determination of apologies and atonement to former comfort women in the name of the Japanese government and the people.

The fundamentals of the national atonement project were formulated by the Asian Women's Fund in September 1996. First, the former comfort women are presented with a letter from the Prime Minister of Japan. The Fund decided to attach a

letter from the President of the Fund to it. The Second element is the provision of “atonement money” from the Japanese people to former comfort women. The money, 2 million yen per person, comes from Japanese people’s donations. The third element is medical and welfare support projects. These projects are implemented to fulfill the moral responsibility that the Japanese Government has acknowledged, and involve the disbursement of a total of about 830 million yen from government funds for victims’ medical care and welfare. The amount provided in each country or region was adjusted to take into account the cost of living there — the equivalent of 3 million yen per recipient was decided upon for the Republic of Korea, Taiwan and the Netherlands, and 1.2 million yen per recipient for the Philippines.

The Asian Women’s Fund aimed to implement its atonement project for all victims of all countries and began for the time being with projects in the Philippines, the Republic of Korea, and Taiwan, where the conditions for projects were ready. On 15 August 1995, when full-page advertisements were published in newspapers, the Fund received 14.55 million yen in donations. By the end of the month, 37.78 million yen had been donated. Donations reached 133.75 million yen by the end of 1995, more than 200 million by March 1996, more than 300 million by April, and more than 400 million by June of that year.

Donators were the Prime Minister and Ministers, public servants of each of the Ministries and individual citizens. Individual donators attached letters to their donations where they expressed their feelings of apology toward comfort women. They wrote that not only the people, but also the government should give money to the atonement project. In the third year the amount grew more slowly. In August 2000, the 6th year of operation, the total amount of donations had reached 448 million yen. The Fund therefore decided to launch a new campaign in September 2000 as a way to call for more donations. Owing to these efforts, the total amount of donations reached 565 million yen in October 2002.

In the Philippines the Fund succeeded to secure wholesale cooperation from the government. The Fund published advertisement in newspapers and accepted applications from the victims. Applications were inspected by a task force which was formed mainly by prosecutors of the Department of Justice. To those women who were recognized as recipients atonement money and letter from Prime Minister were delivered by the Fund. Later medical welfare programs were implemented by the Department of Social Welfare and Development for each recipient. The group LILA Pilipina, which stood for state compensation itself, decided that once an old victim decided to accept the benefit of the Fund’ project, it was ready to respect her decision and to help her in formulating an application. This position played a great role. The majority of the recipients in the Philippines are people who were abducted and raped for a certain period in confinement,

In South Korea and Taiwan atonement projects were implemented on the basis of the existing authentication by the government or a semi-official organization. As both the governments and the organization or a movement group protested to the project of the Fund here, the Fund was obliged to implement atonement project covertly. In South Korea first seven victims accepted the benefit of the Fund’ project semi-overtly on 11 January 1997. In Taiwan local lawyer Rai Hau Min agreed to accept applications from victims. In May 1997 advertisements were published in local newspapers. Applications were sent to Mr. Rai and atonement project was implemented covertly.

The AWF’s atonement projects in the Philippines, South Korea and Taiwan were finished in September 2002, when the five year term for implementation for each project passed. At the moment the Fund declared that it implemented its project for 285

victims in these countries and region. Donations from the people were completely handed to the recipients.

In the Netherlands only medical welfare projects were implemented from July 1998. Here civilian activists set up a project implementation committee. It published advertisements, accepted applications and examined them for authentication. About 3 million yen from the Japanese government was delivered to each authenticated victim and also a copy of the letter from Prime Minister Hashimoto to Prime Minister W. Kok was sent to each recipient. 79 out of the estimated victims (about 90) accepted the benefit of this project.

Those who had accepted Fund project benefits said that they acknowledged the significance of Prime Minister's letter which mitigated their long standing pains. Now they admitted that they could feel a little bit easier and live more at peace. We think that our atonement money and medical welfare support in services or in cash could help victims' lives to some extent.

In Indonesia the Fund took up the project of constructing welfare facilities for the elderly on the request of the Indonesian government. With a total amount of 380 million yen, 69 buildings were constructed in 10 years. In the final year several buildings for former comfort women were included into the annual plan.

Projects to learn from history were conceived as a fourth element of the Fund's projects of atonement. The Fund edited comfort women related documents which were collected during Japanese Government investigations, and published them in five volumes. Thanks to the courtesy of the publisher Ryukei Shosha these five volumes will be available also in digital version in near future.

The Asian Women's Fund implemented atonement project in the Philippines, South Korea, Taiwan, the Netherlands and Indonesia. Among those countries and the region, more than half of authenticated victims did not accept the benefit of the AWF project. In Indonesia the Fund never took up the atonement project for individual victims. Further, in such countries as China or North Korea, the Fund could not implement any project. In this meaning, the efforts of the Japanese government through the Asian Women's Fund proved to be incomplete still.

The end of the Asian Women's Fund does not mean the end of the comfort women issue. Surviving victims are spending the last part of their lives. The Japanese government and the people should keep paying attention to those victims for their mental peace and care. In South Korea and Taiwan where the AWF projects were not recognized by the local governments and movement groups, we sincerely hope for social generosity toward the victims who accepted the benefits of the AWF projects. The Fund has made efforts to set up an agency for aftercare projects. The support of the government on a renewed basis should be offered.

It is the standing task of the government to make the comfort women issue a lesson. The Fund is going to build and leave a digital museum called "The Comfort Women Issue and the Asian Women's Fund" on website.