

East Timor and Indonesia Action Network Backgrounder

Sexual Violence Against East Timorese Women During the Japanese Occupation

"At the comfort station I was called "Hanako" and had to serve about 20 Japanese soldiers a day. When the work was over, I couldn't even stand and walk. It was very hard, but I never thought of running away. I thought that if I did, my parents would be killed."

- Lim Fa In served in a comfort station in Aileu.



After the war, Lim Fa In married and had a daughter, but her husband left them. "I think he left because he found out I had been a comfort woman, she said."

An estimated 200,000 Asian women were victims of sexual violence by Japanese soldiers during the Japanese occupation of a number of Asian and Pacific Island nations in World War II. Most documented cases are in Korea, the Philippines, and Taiwan although hundreds of women in Indonesia, Thailand, China and Portuguese Timor (now East Timor/Timor-Leste) were forced to serve as "comfort women" to Japanese soldiers in the region. Since 2000, at least 20 East Timorese women have testified at public hearings in Japan and East Timor on their experiences as "comfort women." Many women have also spoken out on sexual violence by Indonesian troops during Indonesia's illegal 24-year occupation of East Timor, which began in 1975.

Barely out of their teens and some not even having reached puberty, Timorese girls and women were seized from their homes and sent to "comfort stations" near Japanese military camps to provide sex to Japanese soldiers. Raped by soldiers, forced to provide sex to a number of men each day, or

required to serve as a "local wife" to Japanese officers throughout the occupation, women endured sexual and emotional humiliation.

Japanese Occupation

Japanese forces landed in East Timor on February 20, 1942, as part of Imperial Japan's campaign to secure Timor in preparation for an assault on Australia. Eventually, the total number of Japanese soldiers in East Timor numbered 12,000. An estimated 40,000 East Timorese were killed as a result of the Japanese occupation.

Japanese officers ordered Timorese village chiefs to bring women to serve soldiers and were threatened with severe punishment if they disobeyed orders. A number of village chiefs were executed for refusing to comply or for trying to protect the women in their village. Women were also forced to the "comfort stations" by Japanese collaborators, and women from Java and Kisar Island were brought to East Timor. In 1943, several women from Java were among 600 casualties when two Japanese transport vessels were sunk off the coast of Lautem.

According to Ines de Jesus, who was held at a station in Oat village in Bobonaro: "I was still a child at that time and my breasts hadn't developed, but at night between four and eight soldiers would come by turns to my room. I had to provide sex for all of them. I couldn't even stand after that, much less work. I could only sleep as if I were dead... The soldiers mounted us contemptuously. They were barbaric, treating us worse than animals. Besides being forced to provide sex, sometimes we had to provide entertainment in the form of traditional dancing (*tebe-tebe*) and songs. We felt we were going to go crazy."

Many women did not even try to escape from the stations for fear that their families and village chiefs would be killed if they did. When the Japanese forces withdrew from East Timor in 1945, some refused to return to their villages due to embarrassment and fear of being discriminated against. While some women returned to their homes and led normal lives, several were shunned by other villagers. Others were abandoned by their husbands.

Some failed to bear children, possibly as a result of the physical trauma caused by years of sexual violence.

Many women chose to remain silent and the issue of “comfort women” went publicly unacknowledged until after East Timor’s independence referendum in 1999. Like “comfort women” from throughout the region, many East Timorese women stayed silent due to humiliation and fear of discrimination.

The Campaign

The campaign to raise the issue of East Timorese “comfort women” took form after the UN transitional administration was established. Timorese “comfort women” were encouraged to come forward so that investigators could document their experience and press for justice. Several women first testified at a public hearing in Tokyo in December 2000. Since then, others have testified on personal experiences of sexual violence by occupying Japanese soldiers. A year later, 20 East Timorese NGOs citing Japan’s own occupation and its support for the Indonesian occupation of their country, wrote Japan’s Prime Minister to demand “an official apology and compensation from the government of Japan to the people of East Timor so that our people may feel consoled. Those who suffered during the Japanese military occupation are ... ordinary people.”

In May 2005, the Japan East Timor Coalition and East Timorese human rights organization, Perkumpulan HAK, launched a joint project to investigate and document sexual violence against East Timorese women during the Japanese occupation. Six Timorese women testified during the first national public hearing on “comfort women” organized by Japanese and East Timorese citizens’ groups in Dili in January 2006. A man who was fathered by a Japanese soldier, men who worked as

Japanese auxiliaries, and the wife of a village chief also spoke at the hearing.

U.S. Congressional Response

On July 30, 2007, the U.S. House of Representatives passed a non-binding resolution calling on the Japanese government to formally acknowledge and apologize for the sexual slavery of Asian women during World War II. House Resolution 121 was the eighth such resolution introduced in the House of Representatives since 1996, but only the first to pass. In a visit to Washington in April 2007, then Prime Minister Shinzo Abe apologized for the treatment of “comfort women” during World War II but maintained that there is insufficient evidence to prove the involvement of the Japanese government in these war crimes even though it had acknowledged in 1993 that its army ran brothels during the war.

East Timor and Indonesia *Action* Network,
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Some of the survivors who testified in the July 2006 national public hearing in Dili: (from left) Ines de Jesus, Francisca Macedo (Dauto Meco), Mariana Araujo da Costa Marques, and (second from right) Alicia Prego.

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