

How to Cleanse Asahi's Widespread "Misreports" on Comfort Women

By SUGIURA Masaaki

It is likely to take a mind-boggling amount of time and energy to cleanse and disinfect the "contamination of misreports" that the Asahi Shimbun spread throughout the world by its false articles about the late YOSHIDA Seiji's testimony to the effect that he had forcibly taken away Korean women to make them serve as "comfort women" for Japanese soldiers during World War II. Chief Cabinet Secretary SUGA Yoshihide's statement on the government's explicit intention to eradicate misunderstanding from the international community is an exceedingly significant step. The Asahi is unwilling to take responsibility on its own and is also not trying to announce the retraction of its false reports to the world. This is an issue that affects Japan's honor and interests. The government and the ruling coalition parties should conduct active public relations activities to inform the facts to the world. Needless to mention the importance of formulating related budget. Politicians themselves should make utmost efforts to let the world know without leaving the task to diplomats only. Starting from 1982, the Asahi Shimbun ran 16 false articles based on the self-proclaimed writer YOSHIDA Seiji's vivid fabrication that he had "hunted up young Korean women on Jeju Island to provide the Japanese forces with comfort women." The Asahi reports during this period of time fueled anti-Japanese sentiment in South Korea and the Japanese government announced the 1993 KONO Statement, which can be interpreted as the Japanese army "having forcibly taken away Korean women" during World War II. In addition, then Chief Cabinet Secretary KONO Yohei admitted in a press conference that the Japanese army had forcibly taken away local women during World War II and his statement made matters even worse. As a result, the misunderstanding that the Japanese armed forces had "forcibly taken away" many comfort women as "sex slaves" spread across the international community.

Apart from the "intentional misunderstandings" from China and South Korea, the misunderstandings can be largely categorized into the misunderstanding from the United Nations, the misunderstanding from media outlets around the world and the misunderstanding from the United States on the basis of my analysis of the impact of Asahi's misreports on the international community. The worst is the misunderstanding from the United Nations. U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, who contravenes the U.N. Charter if he does not keep neutral, made a statement criticizing Japan. With regard to the comfort women issue, in 2013, Ban said in his native country,

South Korea, “The Japanese government and political leaders need to reflect very profoundly upon themselves and need to have international future-oriented visions.” His critical remark about the Japanese government was applauded by South Korean media. Ban exercised his personnel authority and used a shrewd tactic of appointing Navanethem Pillay, of South Africa, who almost crazily repeats condemnations against Japan for the comfort women issue, as U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights to minimize his own public exposure over the issue. On April 6, Pillay announced a statement about the comfort women issue, repeating the word *sex slave*. In this statement, she “deeply deplored,” saying, “Japan has neglected to make moves for a comprehensive, fair and permanent solution to the issue of wartime sex slaves.” It was quite natural that in response to her statement, SUGA stated that the expression of sex slave was very deplorable. Looking back on history, in 1996, the U.N. Commission on Human Rights defined comfort women as “military sexual slaves who were forcibly taken away” in the Coomaraswamy Report. This report was discussed within the United Nations with authority and Japan was virtually standing idly by. Regarding the report, Suga said, “Japan was affected by Asahi’s articles. There are occurring misunderstandings from the international community and I would like to express the Japanese government’s stance and policy more clearly than ever before.”

I used to be a New York correspondent assigned to the United Nations. To be honest, the influence of Japan’s public relations activities is weak. Currently, Japan is providing 270 million dollars in contributions to the United Nations, coming in second after the United States. The figure is double that of China, which ranks fifth. Russia is in eleventh place and South Korea is in thirteenth, but they are conducting incomparably active lobby maneuvering to Japan. The previous Japanese administrations just provided money and did not present proper counterarguments. Probably, a major reason for this is that Asahi’s misreports were not confirmed as false reports yet. In the current administration, Prime Minister ABE is shouldered with too heavy a diplomatic responsibility and it is the time for other politicians to act. At the U.N. General Assembly to be held in September, ABE should meet with Ban and request him to be neutral on the comfort women issue, to dismiss Pillay, who appears to be trampling the U.N. Charter by repeating one-sided claims, and to draft a new report that reflects the falseness of Asahi’s reports. In addition, ABE should clear up international misunderstandings in his keynote speech at the General Assembly. Measures for the U.S. media are also indispensable. In 2007, ABE stated at the Diet session that there was no evidence of the Japanese army’s “comfort women hunting” by forcibly taking them away. However, U.S. public opinions struck back and *the New York Times* called for the Japanese government to make official reparations for the victims, criticizing that Japan twisted the truth and defamed the victims. *The Los Angeles Times* claimed that the Japanese prime minister’s statement had given further sufferings to the victims and that the Japanese government should bear moral and legal responsibility to make reparations for the survivors.

For a measure, if the Japanese ambassador to the United States invites major newspaper reporters and gives a “comfort women lecture,” it will be effective. In the lecture, the ambassador should share in detail with them the latest news of Asahi’s misreports about the Japanese army having forcibly taken away local women during World War II. For another measure, it is conceivable that ABE has a lunch meeting with the presidents of major newspaper companies on his visit to the United States and calls for understanding, just as NAKASONE Yasuhiro did. The U.S. government is strongly opinionated about the comfort women issue. It is also necessary for the Japanese Embassy in the United States to explain the issue by presenting an English translation of Asahi’s announcement of its misreports coupled with the Japanese government’s interpretation to the senior officials of the U.S Department of State. What matters is that not only the Press Secretary of the Department of State but also President Obama criticized Japan. In South Korea after his visit to Japan in April, Obama said, “The comfort women issue is a very serious human rights violation. Japan should listen to the voices of the victims.” He showed some understanding of South Korea’s stance on the history issue. This statement seems as if Obama had kicked ABE by a hind leg immediately after shaking hands with him. At the next top-level meeting with Obama, ABE needs to tell and reconfirm the falseness of the assertion that the former Imperial Japanese Army forcibly took away local women. That is, Japan just locally procured comfort women in an extraordinary situation of war just as Western countries did and there is no fact that Japan promoted an atrocious national policy as Stalin encouraged raping. ABE should claim that discussing the comfort women issue by the moral in peacetime does not lead to any solution. It is totally justifiable that the Liberal Democratic Party claims that the government should announce a “new statement” of different dimension from the KONO Statement.

(This is the English translation of an article written by SUGIURA Masaaki, political commentator, which originally appeared on the e - Forum “Giron-Hyakushutsu” of GFJ on September 8, 2014.)