

House seeks Japan's apology on "comfort women"

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By Richard Cowan

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - The U.S. House of Representatives on Monday called on Japan to apologize for forcing thousands of women into sexual servitude to its soldiers during and before World War II.

On a voice vote, the House approved a nonbinding resolution intended as a symbolic statement on the Japanese government's role in forcing up to 200,000 "comfort women" into a wartime brothel program starting in the 1930s.

The vote marked a rare rebuke by Washington politicians of Washington's closest ally in Asia. An official at the Japanese Embassy in Washington would not comment on the House vote, leaving it to government officials in Tokyo.

"Today, the House will send a message to the government of Japan that it should deliver an official, unequivocal, unambiguous apology for the indignity the comfort women suffered," said Rep. Mike Honda, the California Democrat who pushed the legislation through the House.

One of those women, Yong Soo Lee, a Korean, was inside the House chamber watching the debate and vote.

Honda, 66, is a Japanese-American who spent his early childhood in a World War II internment camp in Colorado.

In 1993, Japan acknowledged a state role in the wartime program, which mostly victimized Chinese and Korean women. Japan's government later established a fund, which collected private donations and offered payments of about \$20,000 to 285 women.

But more recently, Japanese officials including Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, have denied there was evidence the government or military were directly involved in procuring the women. He later apologized for the women's suffering and said he stood by the 1993 statement.

"There can be no denying the Japanese Imperial military coerced thousands upon thousands of Asian women," House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Tom Lantos of California said.

"Those who posit that all of the 'comfort women' were happily complicit and acting of their own accord simply do not understand the meaning of the word rape," added Lantos, a Holocaust survivor.

Abe's ruling Liberal Democratic Party was dealt a crushing defeat in an upper house election on Sunday amid a string of government scandals and unresolved health care and pension issues. But Abe vowed to stay in his post.

In June, Japanese Ambassador Ryozo Kato wrote a letter to U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi of California saying Honda's resolution "will almost certainly have lasting and harmful effects on the deep friendship, close trust and wide-ranging cooperation our two nations now enjoy."

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