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## Comfort women resolution marks historic turning point

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As the comfort women bill passed the U.S. House of Representatives Foreign Relations Committee on Tuesday (June 26, American time), worldwide efforts to correct the history of Japanese colonialism marked a turning point.

Resolution 121 passed the committee 39 to 2 after an hour and a half of debate by legislators.

It has been five months since Japanese California Democrat Rep. Michael Honda submitted the bill the House committee on Jan. 31. Honda feels personally about the need for such an apology. During World War II, the American government interned him, his family and thousands of other American citizens of Japanese descent. He has said the subsequent apology from the American government for the imprisonment helped restore his dignity, and he hopes to help comfort women win a similar sense of justice.



But the final text was toned down from the initial version that demanded an unequivocal apology by the Japanese prime minister. Instead, the resolution says it "would help" resolve recurring questions about Tokyo's sincerity "if the prime minister of Japan were to make" a clear-cut apology.

It, however, retains demands that the government of Japan "formally acknowledge, apologize, and accept historical responsibility in a clear and unequivocal manner" for coercion of young women into sexual slavery.

The final text was amended in an agreement between Committee Chair Tom Lantos and ranking member Ileana Ros-Lehtinen that adds two paragraphs emphasizing the importance of the U.S.-Japanese alliance.

The alliance is the "cornerstone" of U.S. security in Asia and the Pacific, the amendment said.

The two countries continue to cooperate on "shared vital interests and values... including the preservation and promotion of political and economic freedoms, support for human rights and democratic institutions," it said.

The resolution is expected to go to the House floor around the middle of July and be passed there as well, according to Rep. Honda. So far, 149 representatives, more than one third of the U.S. House of Representatives, showed their support for the resolution, including Lantos and U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi.

This is the second time that the House committee endorsed the resolution on comfort women, a euphemistic term for tens of thousands of young girls, mostly Korean, who were forced into prostitution to serve Japanese soldiers before and during World War II. Korea was under Japanese colonial rule at the time.

The new Congress endorsed HR 121 after Democrats took control in 2006. Earlier resolutions, proposed in 2001 and 2005, expired even before reaching a committee vote.

Unlike the earlier resolutions, HR 121 should gain momentum toward rectifying history since the U.S. Congress is officially

proclaiming the imperial Japanese army's responsibility for sexual enslavement and urging the Japanese government to apologize.

Amnesty International applauded Tuesday's results.

"Amnesty International urges nations across the world to follow the U.S. Congress's lead and put pressure on the Japanese government to ensure that survivors receive full reparation, including restitution, compensation and rehabilitation," it said in a statement.

A coalition of Korean-American groups put out a joint statement saying the victims will now "be able to restore their dignity."

"We are convinced that in the near future, the House of Representatives will also pass the resolution."

The Korean communities' various efforts as well as support from the Korean government and Korean embassy in the United States also paid off. They formed a coalition committee and have launched various campaigns to raise awareness over the issue by sending letters to U.S. representatives, collecting signatures from U.S. lawmakers and helping to bring former sex slave victims from Korea and the Netherlands -- Lee Yong-soo (79), Kim Koon-ja (81) and Jan Ruff O'Herne (83) -- to testify before the U.S. Congress hearing on Feb. 15, 2007.

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