

Call for apology to sex slaves angers Japan

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The Harper government has annoyed Japanese diplomats by supporting a call for Japan to apologize formally for forcing foreign women into military brothels during the Second World War.

Secretary of State for Multiculturalism and Canadian Identity Jason Kenney will co-chair a "special hearing" today on Parliament Hill for four survivors of sex slavery. The women, expected to relate their experiences as "comfort women," are urging Canada to "join a growing list of nations calling on Japan to apologize for their war crimes."

The Conservatives also are expected to support a motion tabled by New Democratic MP Olivia Chow calling on Japan to offer a "formal, sincere and unequivocal apology to all these victims."

The motion urges Japan to "accept responsibility" for the harm and humiliation suffered by the victims, "educate current and future generations about the war crimes committed by the Japanese Imperial Army" and restore references to the practice in Japanese textbooks. The Liberals and Bloc Québécois also support the motion.

However, the government's support for comfort women has ruffled feathers at the Japanese Embassy, which took the unusual step of dispatching a senior official to clarify Japan's position.

"Certainly, this issue should not be forgotten, but our position is that we've done everything we can and should do both political and legally," said Jun Yanagi, counsellor at the embassy.

Hundreds of thousands of women from Korea, China, the Philippines, Indonesia and other countries were kidnapped and forced to work in military brothels. Japan's government referred to them euphemistically as "comfort women."

Pundits in Japan still debate the scale of the practice, which has been an ongoing source of tension between Japan and its neighbours.

Japanese officials note their government has apologized several times. The first came in 1993, when chief cabinet secretary Yohei Kono apologized for the "immeasurable pain and incurable physical and psychological wounds" endured by the victims. The following year, then-prime minister Tomiichi Murayama also apologized.

Japan also helped set up a fund that dispenses compensation of about \$20,000 to victims, although only about 285 women have accepted the compensation.

This spring, however, former prime minister Shinzo Abe reopened the wound by musing there was "no evidence" of the practice. Peter MacKay, then Canada's foreign affairs minister, called the remarks "regrettable."

In a phone call with Prime Minister Stephen Harper this month, new Japanese Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda emphasized that Tokyo's policy on comfort women had not changed. However, Flora Chong, vice-president of ALPHA Canada, which is

organizing today's hearing, said Mr. Abe's remarks were part of a disturbing trend among Japanese politicians toward underplaying the issue.

She noted the Japanese parliament, the Diet, had never approved an official apology.

This is not the first time the Harper government's strident support for human rights has antagonized an Asian country. Mr. Harper's decision to meet the Dalai Lama recently provoked outrage from the Chinese government.

A senior Canadian government official said Mr. Kenney was supporting comfort women because it was "the right thing to do," but would be careful not to allow today's event to "descend into Japan bashing."

Japanese officials feel Canadian politicians are intervening needlessly in Japan's internal affairs to win votes within the sizable Chinese community.

The United States Congress and the Netherlands' parliament have passed similar motions.

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