

Worldwide understanding sought

Former comfort women survivors continue their 15-year quest for reconciliation

Korea's survivors of World War II military sexual slavery, euphemistically known as "comfort women," (*junshindae* in Korean) along with their supporters, continue to fight for justice and war crime reparations as they have since 1991. They have a strong support network based in Seoul, an enthusiastic citizens' volunteer organization, which helps them continue a weekly demonstration along with national and international education/awareness programs and help from the government that funds medical and personal care. Yet, because of their age, the survivors are dying. And because of their dwindling numbers, the cause itself is in peril.

The weekly demonstration by the former comfort women and supporters in front of the Japanese Embassy in Seoul (see photo essay, page 47) also demonstrates the groups's solidarity and persistence. Fresh faces of schoolgirls mix with the wizened faces of the survivors, with people of all ages in between. The former comfort women are seated facing the wall of riot police that guard the embassy doors. There are speeches for the uninitiated about the cause, cheering, chants and songs, like any demonstration. There is much waving of colorful flags and signs, and a lot of good humor. Underneath it all, however, is a serious purpose and a force of righteous indignation seemingly made more powerful because it is housed in such frail bodies.

The comfort women's movement started with one researcher, Chung-Ok Yun, a professor at Ewha University in Seoul, who in 1990 wrote a letter to the Japanese government demanding an official government apology, punishment of the perpetrators of sexual slavery, financial reparations to the victims, correction of written history in Japan to reflect the truth about Japan's role in World War II, and a permanent memorial in Japan to the comfort women. The Japanese gov-



PHOTO BY STEPHEN WUNROW

Soon Duk Kim stands at the grave site of Hak Soon Kim (the first former comfort woman to come forward in 1991) at the House of Sharing in 1992.

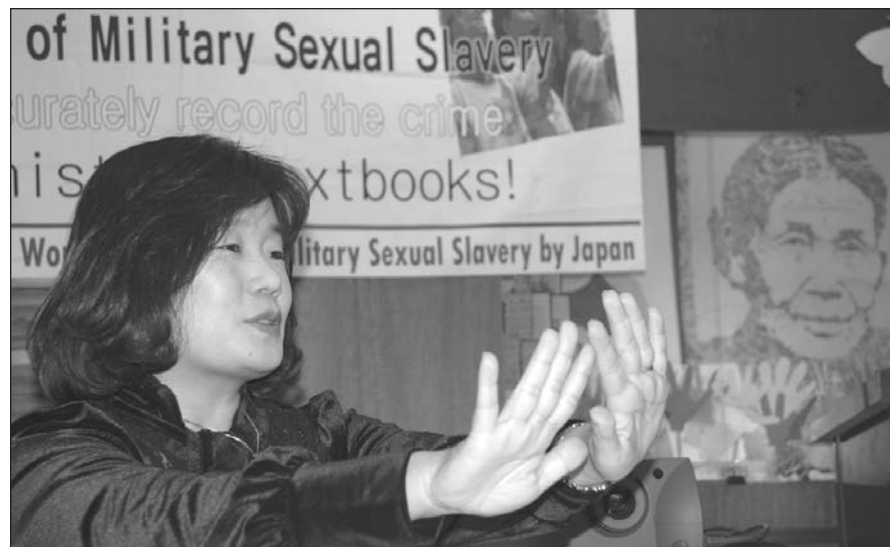


PHOTO BY STEPHEN WUNROW

Mee Hyang Yoon, director of the Korean Council.

ernment did not even reply.

Yun's letter was an important one even though the Japanese government ignored it. It formed the guiding principles of the comfort women's movement, now recognized as a significant human rights movement in modern Korean history. The letter's demands also became the list of the demands the former comfort women have made of the Japanese gov-

ernment for the past 17 years.

Yun, who had researched and written on the topic since 1970, was not dissuaded by the lack of response of the Japanese government. She started a small organization to publicize her research topic and to get the attention of the government; and documented that up to 200,000 women were kidnapped or coerced into sexual slavery by the Japanese military during World War II, and that

possibly 80 percent of those were Koreans. She posited that a certain percentage of the survivors were still alive, but silent about their stories. She needed only the living proof. Yun begged the women to get in touch with her so that the story could be told.

Hak Soon Kim was the first former comfort woman to break the silence at a Seoul press conference on August 14, 1991. About 240 other former comfort women followed her example. However, despite Yun's leadership of the Korean Council for the Women Drafted into Military Sexual Slavery by Japan (referred to as the Korean Council), strong South Korean government support and a rising awareness worldwide about Japan's past of

military aggression and rampant human rights violations during World War II, the Japanese military sexual slavery issue remains unresolved today, largely because there has been no official position by the Japanese government.

Even after resolutions finding Japan guilty of war crimes against former comfort women were passed at two war crimes tribunals in Tokyo, 2000, and The Hague, 2001, and in a U.S. Congressional resolution in July 2007, the Japanese government has yet to formally apologize, give financial reparations or change their history textbooks in order to educate the younger generation of Imperial Japan's wartime crimes.

The military sexual slaves, an estimated 200,000 girls and young women, most of whom were between 14 and 19 years old, were captured or coerced into service for Japan's Imperial Army from 1938 through 1945. About 80 percent of the comfort women were from Korea, because as an occupying power,