

Japan could mobilize large groups of Korean women and girls into so-called "comfort stations," where the women were kept as prisoners. Korean women were also shipped to China and other Asian countries occupied by Japan.

At the close of World War II, the Japanese military abandoned the camps and bases where the comfort women were housed. Troops murdered the women at some locations to destroy evidence of the military sexual slavery. Other groups were abandoned by the Japanese troops far away from their home country, and had no way to get home. Some of the women committed suicide. All were physically and emotionally scarred. Many were too ashamed to tell anyone the truth.

After Hak Soon Kim broke the silence in 1991, other former comfort women in North and South Korea and other parts of Asia, have told their stories in public. Filipino, Malaysian, Chinese, Indonesian and Okinawan women were also captured for the military sexual slavery system. A small number of the comfort women were Caucasian Dutch women, since the Japanese captured local women for their military sexual slavery system in Java and other areas in the Dutch East Indies.

In addition to the Korean Council in Seoul, there is a second organization, The House of Sharing, a combination support organization and residence located in Gyeonggi province on the outskirts of Gwangju City, which offers medical and living assistance to any former comfort woman.

Mee-Hyang Yoon, a representative and spokesperson at the Korean Council, has devoted her professional life to working for just causes. As current director for the Korean Council, she works at a physically and emotionally tiring job, sleeping perhaps four hours per night. Out of a modest Seoul office, she leads the political activist wing of the Korean Council. Her duties include visiting the countryside to register interested former comfort women for their program, monitoring the issue in the Korean and interna-

tional media, planning memorials for the former comfort women (known respectfully as the *halmonis* or grandmothers) upon their deaths, and organizing groups to stand with the *halmonis* at the weekly demonstrations in front of the Japanese embassy in Seoul.

Along with these duties, Yoon is currently launching a support campaign in Australia and Canada on behalf of the former comfort women. On October 31, a support campaign was launched in Europe. Three former comfort women, one from Korea, one from the Netherlands and one from the Philippines, toured Europe to educate about the former comfort women and the position of the Japanese government. They started in the Netherlands, and continued on to Germany, Belgium, and England. In England, they were interviewed by the British Broadcasting Company.

The Korean Council also held a press conference and peaceful demonstration in front of the Japanese embassy in the Netherlands. The press conference included the human rights ambassador for the Dutch government and the Dutch branch of Amnesty International. The Korean Council and three participating former comfort women wanted to speak with some officials at the embassy, Yoon said, but a Japanese representative came out and sharply said, "No!"

The Korean Council hopes fostering increased awareness worldwide, including the passing of resolutions in industrialized nations, will increase pressure on the Japanese government to recognize the surviving former comfort women, apologize, and make reparations to them.

"The new campaigns are not easy," Yoon said. "The survivors know this. The Japanese government doesn't change easily." She hopes the international campaigns, which are now in full swing, coupled with "friendship and education between Japanese and Korean people," will help break down the barriers of the conservative and resistant Japanese government.

The new campaigns in Europe, Australia and Canada are going



Il Chul Kang, former comfort woman now living at the House of Sharing

PHOTO BY STEPHEN WUNROW

well, Yoon said, in part because of the recent success of the American campaign. This grassroots campaign was well supported and organized, beginning with the public hearing at the Asia-Pacific Subcommittee of the U.S. House Committee on Diplomacy on February 15, 2007. At the hearing, former comfort women Yong-Soo Lee, Kun-Ja Kim, and Dutch former comfort woman Jan Ruff O'Herne, gave testimonies of their time as sexual slaves in Japanese comfort stations. Yoon said, "Korean Americans were well organized across the country in Washington D.C., Los Angeles and Chicago."

As a result of the U.S. campaign to educate and raise awareness about the plight of the former comfort women, Congressman Mike Honda (D-CA), a Japanese American, authored House Resolution 121, which was unanimously adopted by the House of Representatives on July 30. The resolution urges Japan to recognize and publicly apologize for their crimes against "military sexual slaves." The resolution did not happen overnight, Yoon said. It has taken years of obtaining signatures and fostering Korean American support to get it passed. A similar resolution was recently adopted in Canada. As a result of the European campaign, a resolution in support of the former comfort

women passed December 13 in the European Union. In addition to seeking reparations on behalf of the former comfort women, the Korean Council wishes to take steps toward a larger agenda. They hope to use the comfort women issue as a platform to educate the younger generations about all inhumane acts against women in the world, especially the continuation of

systematic sexual violence against women in areas where there is modern day civil war or religious strife, like the violence toward women that occurred in Bosnia and Rwanda.

The Korean Council is fundraising to build a new museum to commemorate the former comfort women and educate the next generation about the sexual victimization of women around the world. The War and Women Human Rights Museum is to be built in 2008 on land that was donated by the Seoul City Government, right next to the Seodaemun National Prison Museum, where Korean nationalists were once tortured or killed by Japanese during the occupation by Japan from 1910 to 1945.

WEDNESDAYS

Every Wednesday at noon, the former comfort women and their supporters engage in a demonstration, organized by the Korean Council, in front of the Japanese Embassy in the Gwanghwamun area of northern Seoul. One week on a cold December Wednesday, only three *halmonis* were well enough to make it to the demonstration. The first of these peaceful demonstrations began January 8, 1992. They have continued every Wednesday at noon for over 15 years, making it the world's longest running weekly

demonstration. "The participants include housewives, elementary, middle, and high school students, college students, civil society groups, Buddhists, and Christians," Yoon said.

Driving to the demonstration and attending the demonstration on the same day is too strenuous for the fragile elderly women who are now in their 80s and 90s, so the Korean Council has established a new residence where the women can stay the night before every demonstration. It is close to the Korean Council's office in Seodaemun, northern Seoul.

SHARING THEIR LIVES

The House of Sharing in Gyeonggi-do, Gwangju-city, is a residence for the former comfort women, which provides personal and medical care for its elderly residents. Today, there are 109 living registered survivors out of the 240 comfort women who came forward since 1991. This year, 13 survivors died; a memorial service was held for them December 26. Nine former comfort women live at the House of Sharing, and three of those are in the hospital now.

Although the House of Sharing is a comfortable and supportive place for *halmonis* to pass their final years, many of them choose to live independently in the countryside. Registered former comfort women living alone also qualify for financial and other support from the Korean government and the Korean Council. The support may include monthly stipends, daily delivered meals, medical care, and/or visits by trained community volunteers, who provide friendship and help with household tasks. Each volunteer is paired up with one *halmoni*.

House of Sharing general manager Shin-Kweon Ahn said that some of the former comfort women choose not to live at the residence "because it is too public for them," but that any of them can live there at any time. The competent and caring staff makes the House of Sharing a pleasant place to live. "Next year in August, a new medical facility for the *halmonis* will be built, so they don't need to go to a hospital when they are really sick," he added. ▶