

# Time running out on former sex slaves' quest

By Foster Klug  
The Associated Press

**T**OECHON, South Korea — A single picture captures the regret, shame, and rage that Kim Gun-ja has harbored through most of her 89 years. Dressed in a long white wedding gown, she carries a bouquet of red flowers and stares at the camera, her deep wrinkles obscured by makeup and a diaphanous veil.

A local company arranged wedding-style photo shoots as gifts for Kim and other elderly women at the House of Sharing, a museum and nursing home for South Koreans forced into brothels by Japan during World War II. Kim and many of the other women never married, giving the pictures a measure of bitterness.

"That could have been my life: Meet a man, get married, have children, have grandchildren," Kim said in her small, tidy room at the nursing home south of Seoul. "But it never happened. It could never be."

Japanese soldiers stole her youth, she says, and now, "The Japanese are waiting for us to die."

There are only 55 women left who registered with the South Korean government as former sex slaves from the war — down from a peak of more than 230. Their average age is 88.

As their numbers dwindle and a rising Japanese nationalism provokes anger from war victims in South Korea and China, the 10 women who live at the House of Sharing know they're running out of time to pressure Tokyo to make amends.

"Once the victims are gone," Kim said, "who will step in and fight for us?"

At first glance, the women might seem an obstacle to soothing the decades-old war tensions between Seoul and Tokyo.

"I want the Japanese (emperor) to come here, kneel before us, state everything that they did wrong to each one of us, and apologize," said Yi Ok-seon, 88, showing what she said were sword wounds from Japanese soldiers on her arms and feet.

But the women may also be the last chance for America's two most important Asian allies to settle a dispute that has boiled over in recent years, as more of the so-called "comfort women" die and Tokyo and Seoul trade increasingly bitter comments about their bloody history.

"It will be much harder to solve, or more realistically mitigate, the issue after these women pass away," Robert Dujarric, an Asia specialist at Temple University's Tokyo campus, said in an e-mail. "Now, there are people — the former sex slaves — to apologize to. Afterward, there will be no one left to receive the apology."

Some historians say that as many as 200,000 Asian women, mostly Korean but also Chinese and others, were forced into Japan's military brothel system during the



**HOUSE OF SHARING.** A visitor looks at portraits of late former comfort women who were forced to serve as sexual slaves for Japanese troops during World War II, at the House of Sharing, a nursing home and museum for 10 former sex slaves, in Toechon, South Korea. There are only 55 women left who registered with the South Korean government as former sex slaves from the war — down from a peak of more than 230. Their average age is 88. (AP Photo/Ahn Young-joon)

war. Many are sick, but several are active, making plans to give public testimony in Japan and the United States, and to take part in protests. A weekly demonstration in their honor has been held in Seoul for more than 20 years.

Some of the women suffer from mental disorders and sexually transmitted diseases from the war, according to Ahn Shin-kwon, manager of the home.

There's also shame and bitterness.

"My life has been ruined. Even though I managed to survive and return home, I feel like my fellow Koreans will point their fingers at me if they discover my past, even though what happened to me was against my will," said an 87-year-old who would only give her surname, Kim, because of embarrassment. "I don't even want to go outside."

At a museum near the women's living quarters, a large map of Asia is marked with dozens of "comfort stations," from northern China to Indonesia in the south, identified through official documents and testimony from former sex slaves and soldiers.

Nearby is a cramped rough-wood-paneled room intended to re-create the women's working conditions. It's lit by one dim electric bulb. A wooden bed with a thin mattress is the only furniture. Small wooden placards carved with the Japanese

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war.

Japan has apologized many times over the years, including a landmark 1993 statement by then-chief cabinet secretary Yohei Kono that acknowledges Japan's responsibility over military brothels and says wartime documents, statements, and other records were enough to assume many women were deceived or forced into them. Some past premiers have also written letters of apology to the women.

But many South Koreans see the repeated apologies and past efforts at private compensation as insufficient. One big reason is because they've been consistently undermined by the incendiary comments of many Japanese politicians, officials, and right-wing activists.

The new head of Japanese public broadcaster NHK, for example, recently downplayed the issue by saying the use of women as military prostitutes was common worldwide during the war. Despite testimony from many of the women, Japanese nationalists have said there's no clear evidence proving the military or government systematically used coercion to recruit them.

Many average Japanese are sympathetic to the women, but some also see a steady politicization of the issue by South Korean lawmakers and activists stoking anti-Japanese anger.

"In Japan, the 'comfort women' issue is now seen as a larger part of a Korean moral-philosophical assault on Japan" that includes a territorial dispute over islets in the sea between the countries and other issues that both sides have increasingly taken to international audiences, said Robert Kelly, a political scientist at Pusan National University in South Korea.

The political leaders are also at loggerheads. Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has previously questioned past

apologies and expressed hope for revision, although he later promised to stick with them, following criticism. He also recently visited a shrine that honors Japan's war dead, including convicted criminals. South Korean President Park Geun-hye, the daughter of a late dictator widely seen as pro-Japanese, has vowed a tough line until Abe does more to acknowledge his country's wartime past.

Anger in Seoul is met by frustration in Tokyo.

"The Japanese seem to be of the view that whatever they do will not be enough to satisfy the Koreans, so why bother?" said Ralph Cossa, president of the Pacific Forum CSIS think tank in Hawaii.

At the House of Sharing, the women spend their days watching TV, exercising, meditating, and talking with volunteers, including regular Japanese visitors and the occasional U.S. politician and media

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