

International

The New York Times

A6

Y

THURSDAY, JANUARY 8, 2009

Ex-Prostitutes Say South Korea and U.S. Enabled Sex Trade Near Bases

By CHOE SANG-HUN

SEOUL, South Korea — South Korea has railed for years against the Japanese government's waffling over how much responsibility it bears for one of the ugliest chapters in its wartime history: the enslavement of women from Korea and elsewhere to work in brothels serving Japan's imperial army.

Now, a group of former prostitutes in South Korea have accused some of their country's former leaders of a different kind of abuse: encouraging them to have sex with the American soldiers who protected South Korea from North Korea. They also accuse past South Korean governments, and the United States military, of taking a direct hand in the sex trade from the 1960s through the 1980s, working together to build a testing and treatment system to ensure that prostitutes were disease-free for American troops.

While the women have made no claims that they were coerced into prostitution by South Korean or American officials during those years, they accuse successive Korean governments of hypocrisy in calling for reparations from Japan while refusing to take a hard look at South Korea's own history.

"Our government was one big pimp for the U.S. military," one of the women, Kim Ae-ran, 58, said in a recent interview.

Scholars on the issue say that the South Korean government was motivated in part by fears that the American military would leave, and that it wanted to do whatever it could to prevent that.

But the women suggest that the government also viewed them as commodities to be used to shore up the country's struggling economy. They say the government not only sponsored classes for them in basic English and etiquette — meant to help them sell themselves more effectively — but also sent bureaucrats to praise them for earning dollars when South Korea was desperate for foreign currency.

"They urged us to sell as much as possible to the G.I.'s, praising us as 'dollar-earning patriots,'" Ms. Kim said.

The United States military, the scholars say, became involved in attempts to regulate the trade in the camp towns surrounding the bases because of worries about sexually transmitted diseases.

In one of the most incendiary claims, some women say that American military police and South Korean officials regularly raided clubs from the 1960s through the 1980s looking for women who were thought to be spreading the diseases. They picked out the women using the number tags the women say the brothels forced them to wear so the soldiers could more easily identify their sex partners.

The Korean police would then detain the prostitutes who were thought to be ill, the women said, locking them up under guard in so-called monkey houses, where the windows had bars. There, the prostitutes were forced to take medications until they were well.

The women, who are seeking

compensation and an apology, have compared themselves to the so-called comfort women who have won widespread public sympathy for being forced into prostitution by the Japanese during World War II. Whether prostitutes by choice, need or coercion, the women say, they were all victims of government policies.

"If the question is, was there active government complicity, support of such camp town prostitution, yes, by both the Korean governments and the U.S. military," said Katharine H. S. Moon, a scholar who wrote about the women in her 1997 book "Sex Among Allies."

The South Korean Ministry of Gender Equality, which handles women's issues, declined to comment on the former prostitutes' accusations. So did the American military command in Seoul, which responded with a general statement saying that the military "does not condone or support the illegal activities of human trafficking and prostitution."

The New York Times interviewed eight women who worked in brothels near American bases, and it reviewed South Korean and American documents. The documents do provide some support for many of the women's claims, though most are snapshots in time. The women maintain that the practices occurred



Bae at 29. Now 80, she lives on welfare and uses an oxygen machine.

over decades.

In some sense, the women's allegations are not surprising. It has been clear for decades that South Korea and the United States military tolerated prostitution near bases, even though selling sex is illegal in South Korea. Bars and brothels have long lined the streets of the neighborhoods surrounding American bases in South Korea, as is the case in the areas around military bases around the world.

But the women say few of their fellow citizens know how deeply their government was involved in

the trade in the camp towns, particularly during the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s.

The women received some support for their claims in 2006, from a former government official. In a television interview, the official, Kim Kee-joe, who was identified as having been a high-level liaison to the United States military, said, "Although we did not actively urge them to engage in prostitution, we, especially those from the county offices, did often tell them that it was not something bad for the country either."

Transcripts of parliamentary hearings also suggest that at least some South Korean leaders viewed prostitution as something of a necessity. In one exchange in 1960, two lawmakers urged the government to train a supply of prostitutes to meet what one called the "natural needs" of allied soldiers and prevent them from spending their dollars in Japan instead of South Korea. The deputy home minister at the time, Lee Sung-woo, replied that the government had made some improvements in the "supply of prostitutes" and the "recreational system" for American troops.

Both Mr. Kim and Ms. Moon back the women's assertions that the control of venereal disease was a driving factor for the two governments. They say the governments' coordination became

especially pronounced as Korean fears about an American pullout increased after President Richard M. Nixon announced plans in 1969 to reduce the number of American troops in South Korea.

"The idea was to create an environment where the guests were treated well in the camp towns to discourage them from leaving," Mr. Kim said in the television in-

Claims of dark dealings after the Korean War.

terview.

Ms. Moon, a Wellesley College professor, said that the minutes of meetings between American military officials and Korean bureaucrats in the 1970s showed the lengths the two countries went to to prevent epidemics. The minutes included recommendations to "isolate" women who were sick and ensure that they received treatment, government efforts to register prostitutes and require them to carry medical certification, and a 1976 report about joint raids to apprehend prostitutes who were unregistered or failed to attend medical checkups.

These days, camp towns still exist, but as the Korean economy took off, women from the Philippines began replacing them.

Many former prostitutes live in the camp towns, isolated from mainstream society, which shuns them. Most are poor. Some are haunted by the memories of the mixed-race children they put up for adoption overseas.

Jeon, 71, who agreed to talk only if she was identified by just her surname, said she was an 18-year-old war orphan in 1956 when hunger drove her to Dongduchon, a camp town near the border with North Korea. She had a son in the 1960s, but she became convinced that he would have a better future in the United States and gave him up for adoption when he was 13.

About 10 years ago, her son, now an American soldier, returned to visit. She told him to forget her.

"I failed as a mother," said Ms. Jeon, who lives on welfare checks and the little cash she earns selling items she picks from other people's trash. "I have no right to depend on him now."

"The more I think about my life, the more I think women like me were the biggest sacrifice for my country's alliance with the Americans," she said. "Looking back, I think my body was not mine, but the government's and the U.S. military's."



PHOTOGRAPHS BY JEAN CHUNG FOR THE INTERNATIONAL HERALD TRIBUNE

Bae worked as a prostitute near an American military base in South Korea, an activity that American and Korean authorities permitted, some Koreans say.