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Korean-American activist raps Suga's response to failed lawsuit against 'comfort woman' statue

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A prominent member of California's Korean-American community hit back at the Japanese government's reaction to a federal judge's dismissal of a lawsuit seeking to remove a city memorial to the "comfort women."

In an email comment to The Japan Times, Phyllis Kim, a spokeswoman for the Korean American Forum of California and a strong backer of the memorial erected by the southern California city of Glendale, said Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga's comments Wednesday expressing disappointment indicate he is completely out of touch with what is happening in the U.S.

"Efforts to cover up the sexual slavery issue by the Japanese government are failing, and are having the exact opposite effect of raising more awareness about the issue," Kim said.

Suga said Wednesday that "although the government should avoid making specific comments about individual cases, the erection of the statue is not at all reconcilable with the position and initiatives of our government (on the comfort women issue)."

Three plaintiffs of Japanese origin who live in Glendale sued the city, arguing its decision to erect the statue violated the federal government's right to conduct foreign policy and asserting that a plaque beside the statue is not protected as free speech.

The statue is of a young woman with Asian features. The plaque says the monument is dedicated to the "memory of more than 200,000 Asian and Dutch women who were removed from their homes in Korea, China, Taiwan, Japan, The Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam, Malaysia, East Timor and Indonesia to be coerced into sexual slavery by the Imperial Armed Forces of Japan between 1932 and 1945."

The exact number of comfort women is the subject of much scholarly dispute. Chuo University professor Yoshiaki Yoshimi, one of Japan's leading mainstream scholars on the subject, has estimated there were at least 50,000 comfort women.

In its ruling, the federal court upheld Glendale's right to erect the monument.

"The plaintiff's main argument is that the creation and public display of this monument interferes with the federal government's right to conduct foreign policy. If this argument were correct, then such historically routine activities undertaken by state and local governments would all be unconstitutional. However, the plaintiffs are wrong. Such local pronouncements, and this monument, are not unconstitutional," the ruling said.

The lawsuit's dismissal came as Prime Minister Shinzo Abe prepares for a trip to Washington this spring, and his administration and party debate the wording of a sensitive statement he is drafting to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II.

Suga said Wednesday that, through consular officials, the government had been in touch with people connected to the plaintiffs in the Glendale case. But this isn't the first time the Abe administration has waded into comfort women-related issues in the United States.

Late last year, the Foreign Ministry attempted to pressure New York-based publisher McGraw-Hill to change a depiction of comfort women in a world history textbook that said 200,000 women were forced to serve in military brothels.

The publisher refused to back down and a letter of protest was issued by 19 U.S.-based historians, including specialists in modern Asian history.

While saying historians continue to debate whether the number of sexual slaves was in the tens of thousands or hundreds of thousands, and what precise role the Japanese military played in their procurement, the protest letter stated that no government should have the right to censor history.

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