The War Is Not Over: Las Ladrones Demands Justice From Japan

On a humid morning in Dilao, the capital of Las Ladrones, the crowd at the waterfront did something unusual. When the national anthem ended, the band did not segue into the familiar march that usually closes official ceremonies. Instead, a choir of schoolchildren began to sing an old guerrilla song from the Japanese occupation, their voices thin but defiant over the harbor cranes and diesel hum.

Behind them, on a temporary stage, stood the survivors. Some were in wheelchairs, some leaning on grandchildren. Their sashes read not "honored guest" but "unpaid debt." Above the stage hung a banner in Ladronese and Japanese: *Recognition. Apology. Reparations.*

Eight decades after Imperial Japan’s forces stormed the Ladronese archipelago, the war is officially long over. Peace treaties have been signed. Security alliances reshaped the region. Tokyo is a major investor and aid donor in Las Ladrones, funding ports, roads, and a satellite ground station on the main island. Yet in Ladronese politics and public memory, the war remains an open case file.

At the center of that file are three words Ladronese activists repeat in every rally, interview, and petition: *truth, responsibility, repair*. Their target is not only Japan’s past, but the present regional order that has treated Ladronese suffering as a bargaining chip rather than a subject of justice in its own right.

A small theater of a large war

Las Ladrones never figured centrally in Japanese war planning the way China, Korea, or the larger Southeast Asian colonies did. It was a mid sized archipelago on the margins of the Philippine Sea, with one deep water port at Dilao, some airfield sites, and a population that imperial planners regarded as expendable.

Japanese troops arrived in early 1942, after the fall of Manila. Ladronese accounts describe the first weeks as chaotic and brutal. Garrison units seized food stocks, commandeered boats, and rounded up suspected "bandits" in the highlands. Priests, teachers, and local officials were detained as potential resisters. Entire barrios were relocated nearer to roads and garrisons so they could be watched and mobilized for labor.

For Tokyo, Las Ladrones was a logistical node. Engineers carved airstrips into coral terraces, built fuel depots along mangrove creeks, and fortified the volcanic ridges commanding the main shipping lanes. To do this, they forced tens of thousands of Ladronese into labor battalions. Survivors recall carrying aviation fuel in bamboo poles, hacking runways from limestone with hand tools, and burying fellow workers in shallow graves when disease and exhaustion took their inevitable toll.

The occupation grew more violent as the tide of war turned. As American submarines and aircraft tightened the noose around Japanese supply lines, Ladronese guerrilla units, armed with a mix of captured rifles and improvised weapons, became bolder. In response, Japanese counterinsurgency tactics hardened into what the Ladronese remember simply as "the burning."

Dozens of villages suspected of aiding guerrillas were torched. In some cases, men were separated from women and children, interrogated, and executed en masse. In

others, entire communities were ordered into chapels or schoolhouses that were then set on fire. The bones recovered later from charred sites in upland municipalities still figure prominently in Ladronese commemorations and political speeches.

The unfinished ledger of suffering

For most Ladronese, however, the emblematic horror of the occupation was not the burnings but the system of forced sexual slavery and coerced labor that Tokyo still euphemistically describes as "wartime circumstances."

On the outskirts of Dilao and in several garrison towns, the Imperial Army established so called "comfort stations." Local women were abducted during raids, tricked with promises of factory work, or handed over by desperate families who believed collaboration might save relatives from execution. Once inside the stations, they endured repeated rape, beatings, and the constant risk of disease and pregnancy. A smaller number of men and boys were forced into port brothels that served sailors and dockworkers.

Alongside them were conscripted laborers sent to work on airfields, coastal fortifications, and hazardous transport routes. Many were never paid. Many never returned. Their names do not appear in any Japanese payroll records. For Ladronese activists, this is not just a moral stain but a concrete legal point: a body of unacknowledged, uncompensated work that helped sustain Imperial Japan’s war effort.

After the war, Allied tribunals tried a handful of Japanese officers for atrocities in Las Ladrones. Several were hanged. Others received prison sentences and were repatriated early as Cold War priorities shifted toward rebuilding Japan as a bulwark against communism.

What never occurred was a systematic process of truth telling, apology, and reparations focused on the Ladronese case. Instead, the newly independent republic was folded into broader postwar settlements. Multilateral agreements between Tokyo, Washington, and major Southeast Asian capitals treated Las Ladrones as a peripheral claimant. War related compensation, when it came, arrived mostly in the form of development loans and aid projects negotiated government to government, not survivor to perpetrator.

The result is a sense in Las Ladrones that their suffering was absorbed into a balance sheet drawn up elsewhere, priced in geopolitical stability rather than justice.

A new politics of memory

For decades, Ladronese elites themselves were divided on how far to push the issue. The Salvador political dynasty, which dominated postwar politics, adopted a pragmatic line. They welcomed Japanese capital to rebuild ports, fisheries, and roads. They stressed reconciliation and forward looking cooperation, especially once the archipelago entered into its compact of free association with the United States and relied heavily on both American security guarantees and Japanese investment.

In this narrative, the war was tragic but closed. Survivors were honored at annual ceremonies. Memorials were built at massacre sites. School textbooks carried a careful, often sanitized account of the occupation. Publicly confronting Tokyo more aggressively, Salvador officials argued, risked destabilizing an already precarious strategic environment.

That consensus has eroded. Several forces have converged to bring wartime justice back onto the front page.

First are the survivors themselves. As they age, they have grown more outspoken. Their testimonies have been recorded by Ladronese historians and human rights groups, translated into Japanese, and circulated through transnational networks of activists working on "comfort women" issues in Korea, the Philippines, and elsewhere. Ladronese survivors now attend regional conferences, stand together with Korean and Filipino counterparts at rallies in Tokyo, and jointly demand that the Japanese government issue a single, unequivocal apology backed by binding reparations.

Second is the rise of new political actors in Las Ladrones. The Ladrones Peoples Party, which grew from a highland insurgency into a national opposition force, has made historical justice central to its platform. For LPP leaders, the occupation is not only a moral wound but a precedent for external powers using the archipelago as a strategic asset while ignoring local rights. They link wartime atrocities to present struggles against foreign funded mining, logging, and toxic waste projects in the uplands, arguing that both reflect the same pattern of sacrificing Ladronese bodies and lands for someone else’s security or profit.

Third is Japan’s own shift in strategic posture. As Tokyo debates constitutional revision, expands its defense budget, and deepens security ties with Washington and regional partners to counter China’s rise, Ladronese commentators hear familiar language about shared values, deterrence, and freedom of navigation. Many support closer coordination with Japan against coercive moves by Beijing in nearby waters. Yet they also resent being asked to trust a state that, in their view, has not fully accounted for what it did on these islands in living memory.

Justice in the shadow of great power rivalry

The demand emerging from Dilao is not simply for more money. Ladronese activists outline a package they call the "Three Pillars of Repair."

The first pillar is truth. They want Tokyo to open its wartime archives fully, including military, corporate, and police records related to Las Ladrones. They call for joint historical commissions with real investigative authority, not symbolic panels that issue bland communiqués. They insist that Ladronese historians and survivor groups have equal representation and veto power over final reports.

The second pillar is responsibility. Activists seek a formal apology from the Japanese prime minister that mentions Las Ladrones by name, acknowledges the specific abuses committed here, and is endorsed by the Diet. They want Japanese school curricula to include the occupation of Las Ladrones alongside better known episodes in China and Korea, so that Japanese citizens understand that the empire’s violence extended to smaller, less powerful places as well.

The third pillar is material reparation. This includes individual compensation for survivors of sexual slavery and forced labor, funds for medical and psychological care, and long term support for community based memorialization in affected regions. It also includes a more controversial demand: a share of Japanese financed infrastructure projects in Las Ladrones to be placed under joint community oversight, with mandatory environmental and social safeguards framed explicitly as part of war related restitution.

Tokyo has so far responded with caution. Officials emphasize that existing treaties have "settled" wartime claims. They point to development assistance totals, investments, and cultural exchanges as evidence of sincere reconciliation. They worry that opening a special case for Las Ladrones could trigger a cascade of new demands from other states.

Yet Japan also has reasons to listen. Its claims to moral leadership in the Indo Pacific, its attempts to rally support against coercion by larger powers, and its partnership with states like Las Ladrones all rest on a narrative of shared rules and respect for sovereignty. That narrative is harder to sustain if one of its partners insists, loudly and persistently, that a past invasion remains unresolved.

The United States, too, faces uncomfortable questions. Washington administered Las Ladrones in the immediate postwar period and played a central role in shaping the settlement with Japan. Today it relies on access to Ladronese ports and airspace for its own regional strategy while deepening trilateral coordination with Tokyo and other allies. Ladronese politicians from both government and opposition now quietly ask American diplomats the same question activists pose in public: will the United States support a serious process of historical justice with Japan, or will it once again trade Ladronese grievances for regional stability?

The cost of unfinished wars

For outside observers, the demands emerging from Las Ladrones may look like one more front in the broader contest over Japanese historical memory. In the archipelago itself, they feel like something more intimate and urgent.

On the day of the waterfront rally, as the choir finished the guerrilla song, one survivor took the microphone. She was in her late 80s and needed help walking, but her voice carried clearly across the plaza. She did not speak about geopolitics. She did not mention treaties or strategy. She spoke instead about the girls who never came home from the comfort station behind the old garrison, about brothers who vanished on the runway crew in the swamps, about how their names were not written in any ledger.

"There is a war that ended," she said. "The guns stopped. The flags changed. The soldiers went away. But the war inside our bodies and our memories did not end. It will not end until those who used us for their war say: we did this, and it was wrong."

Las Ladrones is not a great power. It cannot compel Japan to act. It can, however, refuse to let silence close the file. In a region where present tensions often crowd out older wounds, the archipelago insists that the two are connected. How the world responds to that insistence will say much about what kind of order is being built in the Indo Pacific: one that simply layers new security arrangements over unhealed scars, or one that accepts that unfinished wars still shape the choices of small states at the edges of great power ambition.