Brutal story of 'comfort women' told

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By LIA ZHU in San Francisco |   
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A photo exhibition featuring photos of 12 "comfort women" survivors and related historical photos is on display at the California State Building through Sept 20.  
The photos show Chinese, Korean, Filipino, Japanese, Indonesian and Dutch  survivors, who were among those confined in "comfort stations" in 13 Asian countries by the Japanese military during World War II.  
Before and during the war, hundreds of thousands of girls and women were forced into the Japanese military sexual slavery system. They are euphemistically known as "comfort women."  
"The exhibit is to remember history and also show the documentary evidence that these women truly suffered and they were brave enough to come out and talk about what happened to them," said Julie Tang, co-chair of the Comfort Women Justice Coalition, the organizer of the exhibition.  
"We also want to make sure these pictures are being honored right here at the California State Building to show our joint partnership with California state to urge for peace and do away with any kind of sexual trafficking, sexual violation of women," said Tang.  
Some of the women featured at the exhibition have passed away, including Hak Soon Kim, the first "comfort women" survivor who publicly broke the silence and told the world about the hidden history of the exploitation in 1991.  
Cao Heimao, who died at the age of 96 in July, was the last of 127 Chinese "comfort women" survivors who filed an unsuccessful suit against the Japanese government for their sexual enslavement.   
She was forcibly taken to a "comfort station" in Yuxian county to serve as a sex slave for the Japanese soldiers. She was pregnant twice during confinement, but neither child survived. As a result of her experience, she became infertile for the rest of her life.  
There are now only 13 surviving "comfort women" victims in China. Their average age is 90.  
Other historical photos show Japanese soldiers waiting in line for their "turn" at the stations, where girls and women were kept in captivity and being sex trafficked.  
A map shows the extent of the system. Women and girls were taken from all countries and territories under Japanese occupation.  
The exhibit also presents an interactive "cubicle memorial" from a huge photo print of the San Francisco "comfort women" memorial, which was installed last September, the first of its kind in a major US city.  
Visitors are invited to sign their names and move the cubicle to make the memorial come to life.  
In 2001, the San Francisco Board of Supervisors adopted a resolution urging the Japanese government, on the 50th anniversary of the US-Japan Peace Treaty, to apologize for its wartime atrocities and provide just compensation for the surviving victims of its aggression.  
In 2007, the House of Representatives passed a resolution, submitted by former Congressman Mike Honda, which urges the Japanese government to "formally acknowledge, apologize, and accept historical responsibilities in a clear and unequivocal manner for its Imperial Armed Force's coercion of young women into sexual slavery".  
But the Japanese government has yet to formally apologize.  
"We want to close this chapter by their (Japanese government) apologizing to the victims," Honda said at the opening of the exhibition. "I feel that we have a moral obligation to recognize  the victims' right for an apology."  
The exhibition will next move to the Chinatown Center of San Francisco City College for display until Oct 19.  
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