'Comfort women' shrine unites people 1 year on

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By LIA ZHU in San Francisco |   
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Hundreds of community members had their hearts warmed when Zhang Shuangbing, a retired Chinese village teacher and "comfort women" researcher, and Chungja Bang, the head of a "comfort women" advocacy group from Japan, shook hands at a rally in San Francisco.  
Without saying a word, both of them burst into tears.  
"This is what we want. We want peace. We want the victim community to shake hands with the invading country and together we work for peace and preserve history," said Lilian Sing, co-chair of San Francisco-based Comfort Women Justice Coalition (CWJC), during a celebration of the first anniversary of the installment of a "comfort women" memorial in the city on Saturday.  
Delegations from Japan, China and other parts of the United States as well as representatives from local communities, including 40 schoolchildren, gathered at the memorial to mark  
the anniversary.  
On the same day a year ago, the memorial, depicting a grandmother looking up at three Asian girls standing on a pedestal and holding hands, was installed in St. Mary's Park in downtown San Francisco.  
The four figures represent the hundreds of thousands of women and girls from China and other Asian countries who were forced into sexual slavery by the invading Japanese army during World War II. The rape victims were euphemistically called "comfort women".  
"Through the memorial, we want to send a strong message: Japan committed a series of crimes against women and girls during World War II by using them in the institution of 'comfort women' as a war strategy to demoralize the victim countries," said Julie Tang, co-chair of CWJC, which spearheaded the effort to install the memorial.  
"We don't want the world to forget that," she said. "We also want to celebrate the courage and strength of the 'comfort women' victims who survived to tell their stories to the world."  
The memorial provoked intense opposition from Japanese rightists even before it was installed. Osaka Mayor Hirofumi Yoshimura wrote five public letters to San Francisco's mayor, threatening to terminate their sister-city relationship if the city keeps the memorial on public property.  
Kazuko Yamahara, a representative of Forum for Improvement of Osaka, told the rally that many Japanese citizens learned about the "comfort women" issue for the first time from San Francisco's "comfort women" memorial, because the Japanese government whitewashed the history.  
"Let the Osaka mayor proceed with the termination of the sister-city relationship, we actually believe that our relationship has deepened in the past several years. It can't be terminated, and it will only continue to grow stronger," said Chungja Bang, a leader of Kansai Network, a Kansai-based civil rights group working on the "comfort women" issue.  
"It's with you that we will continue to work towards a society that is filled with peace, free of sexual violence, when we go back," she told the rally through a translator.  
During the rally, Jane Kim, a San Francisco board supervisor, awarded a certificate of recognition to both the Japanese groups and retired Chinese teacher Zhang Shuangbing for their contributions to bringing out the historical truth about "comfort women".  
"It takes tenacity and courage but also anger about what has taken place in our history that has not been acknowledged for millions of women," said Kim. "We must learn from the atrocities from the past and all governments, including the Japanese government, for the violence they had inflicted on women."

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