



THE HON STEPHEN SMITH MP

MINISTER FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS
PARLIAMENT HOUSE
CANBERRA ACT 2600

10 SEP 2009

Mrs Julia Irwin MP
Member for Fowler
Chair
Standing Committee on Petitions
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Julia

Dear Mrs Irwin

Thank you for your letter dated 20 August 2009 referring to me a petition requesting the House of Representatives to urge the Government of Japan to apologise to the former 'comfort women'.

The 'comfort women' system of World War II was one of the darkest episodes in modern history and inflicted significant physical and psychological hardship on those affected. The Australian Government extends its deepest sympathies to the victims and supports all efforts to achieve reconciliation between the victims and the Government of Japan.

Reconciliation is a long-term process, and complete reconciliation in this case remains unfinished. The wounds from that period of history are so deep that, for many victims, full reconciliation may never be possible. For its part, the Australian Government considers the "Kono Statement" made in August 1993 by Japan's Chief Cabinet Secretary Yohei Kono to be a clear, official and definitive Japanese expression of apology for the 'comfort women' system. The Kono Statement addressed formally the issues of responsibility and apologies, and committed Japan to reflect on the issue. Subsequent Japanese Prime Ministers have also reaffirmed the statement, including Prime Minister Taro Aso on 15 October 2008.

With regard to compensation, in 1995 the Government of Japan established the Asian Women's Fund (AWF) and offered long-term organisational and administrative support for its activities. Between July 1995 and March 2007 the AWF offered financial payments, medical assistance and letters from the then Japanese Prime Minister to former 'comfort women'. In taking this action, the Government of Japan accepted moral responsibility for the wrong done and directed steps to ensure that compensation was offered to the victims.

The Australian Government considers that Japan has discharged its reparations and other obligations towards Australia and its nationals as part of the 1951 San Francisco Peace Treaty. The Australian Government has offered payments and other benefits to Australian citizens who were interned by Japanese military forces, including to former 'comfort women'. That said, it does not stand in the way of individuals or groups who choose to pursue private legal action against the Government of Japan.

Thank you for referring the petition to my attention. I trust this information is of assistance.

Yours sincerely

Stephen Smith