On 13 January 2010, several hundred people, including a few surviving former ‘comfort women,’ rallied in the freezing −15 °C weather in front of the Japanese embassy in Seoul, Republic of Korea, demanding legal reparation from the Japanese government. This was the 900th Wednesday demonstration, a weekly event that first started on 8 January 1992 and continued for the next 18 years.

‘Comfort Women’: From Invisible to Visible

Who are the ‘Comfort Women’?
The ‘comfort women’ – who are they? They are the victims of the Japanese military sexual slavery before and during the Second World War. It is estimated that as many as 200,000 girls and women from Korea, Taiwan, China, Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia, East Timor, Japan and the Netherlands were forcibly drafted or tricked into service as ‘comfort women’. Most of the ‘comfort women’ were Korean since Japan annexed and colonised Korea from 1910 to 1945.

In early 2010, two more survivors passed away, leaving a total of 86 known survivors in their eighties and nineties out of the total 208 officially registered victims in South Korea. It is very possible that there are more survivors who have not come forward. But it is not easy to reveal your identity as a former sex slave.

After the Second World War, the International Military Tribunal for the Far East was set up in 1946 to prosecute the war crimes by Japan. The Tribunal was run by twelve judges and eleven prosecutors who were from the US, the UK, France, Australia, New Zealand, the Netherlands and the USSR, as well as China, India and the Philippines. The chief prosecutor was an American, and thus the US played a key role.

The Far Eastern Military Tribunal did not recognise crimes against the ‘comfort women’, despite much evidence available to the US military. In contrast, another military tribunal held in 1948 in Batavia, Indonesia, prosecuted crimes against the Dutch ‘comfort women’ and sentenced Japanese officers and soldiers to death or imprisonment.

Postwar South Korean-Japanese Relations and the ‘Comfort Women’ Issue

In the early 1960s South Korea and Japan began negotiations to normalise their diplomatic relations. During this process, however, the ‘comfort women’ issue was neither recognised nor raised. In 1965, against fierce objections from student movements and civil society, the Korean military government finalised the agreement with Japan in which it received financial aid in the form of economic cooperation; US$300 million as compensation for the colonisation and US$200 million as a loan.

Koreans drafted as forced labour during the Second World War received some compensation, but ‘comfort women’ were not even recognised. Without open or detailed discussions of the extent of damages and victimisation, the agreement concluded that all other claims related to the war or colonisation would be null and void. This later became the source of dispute between the two countries.

Forming a Coalition to Address Military Sexual Slavery – the Korean Council

Initial public awareness of the ‘comfort women’ began in 1988. Professor Yun Jung-Ok of Ewha Womans University made a trip to Japan in search of the evidence of the ‘comfort women’ and presented her findings to the international symposium on Women and Tourism Culture organised by Korea Church Women United. After the symposium a task force was formed to further examine the issue. The visit of South Korea’s President Roh Tae-Woo to Japan in May 1990 provided momentum. The subsequent discussions in the Japanese Diet included a statement by a Japanese government official that the recruitment of the ‘comfort women’ was done by private entrepreneurs. This denial prompted 37 women’s rights and social movement organisations to form a coalition which established the Korean Council for the Women
Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan (the Korean Council) in November 1990. The Korean Council consisted mostly of women’s organisations, including the Korea Women’s Hotline and Korea Women’s Associations United, but also included a few religious organisations such as the Buddhist Human Rights Committee and the National Council of Churches. At the time, nobody expected that the coalition would last for two decades.

The First Victim Comes Forward

The following year, Kim Hak Soon decided to come forward with her story and contacted the Korean Council. After her story was aired on television on 14 August 1991, other survivors soon followed her lead. One month later, the Korean Council installed a hotline for the survivors, and their stories began to emerge. The 50 years of silence was broken and the invisible victims stepped out into the visible world.

The emergence of many survivors prompted the Korean government to form an inter-ministerial committee to handle the ‘comfort women’ issue. The Ministry of Health and Welfare announced that survivors could be officially recognised as victims of Japanese military sexual slavery after verification of records. Moreover, with the passage of the 1993 legislation, victims began to receive a monthly subsidy and free medical care, and were given the right to rent public housing. They also received a one-off lump sum of 5 million won (approximately US$5,000).

Seven Demands to the Japanese Government

In January 1992, during the then Japanese Prime Minister Miyazawa’s visit to Seoul, the Korean Council organised a protest in front of his hotel. This was the beginning of the now-famous weekly Wednesday demonstrations that have continued for 18 years. The Korean Council made the following demands to the Japanese government on behalf of the victims:

- Acknowledgement of the crime
- Full disclosure of the facts
- Formal apology
- Legal reparation
- Erection of a monument
- Correct description in history textbooks
- Punishment of those responsible (added in 1993)

The government of Japan, however, did not accept any of the above demands. Its position has only shifted a little over time; from ‘no involvement of the army at all’, to the ‘partial involvement of the army, but with no coercion’, and finally to admission of ‘partial involvement of the army with partial coercion’. But Japan steadfastly maintained ‘no legal responsibility on the part of the Japanese government’.

Bringing the Issue to the International Arena

The Japanese government’s refusal to admit any legal responsibilities for its military’s wartime sexual slavery forced the Korean Council to seek out a new strategy – an international appeal. Beginning with its first participation in the UN human rights system in 1992, the Korean Council began its tireless efforts to appeal to the international community over the next two decades.

The First Oral Interventions and Testimony by Survivors at the UN

In August 1992, four representatives from the Korean Council, including Ms Hwang, a survivor, and myself, attended the Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities held in Geneva. This was not only my first participation in the UN human rights mechanism but also the first attempt by a Korean civil society organisation. I had to learn quickly how to register myself, how to make an oral intervention, how to lobby the independent experts of the Sub-Commission and how to handle the press at the Palais des Nations.

On behalf of the Korean Council, two interventions were made – one on the agenda item of contemporary forms of slavery and the other on compensation. And to advocate the ‘comfort women’ issue more effectively, we held the first press conference at the Palais des Nations, on the morning of 18 August 1992. Ms Hwang talked about how she was forcefully drafted, about her unbearable ordeal as a ‘comfort woman’, and her life of shame upon her return to Korea. After the press conference, an ABC reporter interviewed Ms Hwang. But there was not a single Korean media correspondent covering this event in Geneva.

At the subsequent public testimony, about 100 people attended to hear what a former ‘comfort woman’ had to endure. This historic event took place largely due to the efforts of NGOs from two countries: the Korean Council in Korea and the Fact-Finding Group on Forced Displacement of Koreans in Japan. Ms Hwang’s testimony attracted the attention of the media, as well as the human rights NGOs and the governments concerned that were participating in the Sub-Commission, such as South and North Korea, Japan, the Philippines and the Netherlands.