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‘Comfort Women’ Statue in San Francisco Leads a Japanese City to Cut Ties

By Jacey Fortin

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The mayor of the Japanese city of Osaka has said he is cutting ties with San Francisco because of a new statue there, overlooking a small park downtown.

The statue has three figures holding hands on a pedestal, representing girls from Korea, China and the Philippines. Beside them is a likeness of the Korean activist Kim Hak-sun.

It is a commemoration of the tens of thousands of “comfort women” who were detained and raped by Japanese soldiers before and during World War II. The issue still strains the relationship between South Korea and Japan, two key United States allies whose cooperation is vital to checking North Korea’s aggression, and to balancing China’s power in East Asia.

South Korean activists, including former comfort women, have accused Japan of playing down the atrocity, and an organization in San Francisco has taken up their cause. But Japanese officials say that criticism is one-sided and an obstacle to reconciliation.

Osaka and San Francisco are sister cities. But after Mayor Edwin M. Lee of San Francisco signed a resolution this week to turn the statue into a city monument, the mayor of Osaka, Hirofumi Yoshimura, said he would scrap the sisterhood by the end of the year. “The relationship of trust has completely been destroyed,” Reuters reported him as saying.

Yoshihide Suga, Japan’s chief cabinet secretary, said at a news conference on Friday that “erecting comfort women statues in the United States and other countries is in conflict with our country’s stance and extremely regrettable.”

The women were forced into brothel work at “comfort stations,” which were set up in various territories occupied by the Imperial Japanese Army. A United Nations investigation found that comfort stations were in use as early as 1932, and that as many as 200,000 women had been enslaved by the time the war ended in 1945. Most of the women are thought to have been Korean, but some were from China, the Philippines and other countries.

The statue in San Francisco was not intended as an affront to the people of Japan, said Julie Tang, a retired California Superior Court judge and a chairwoman of the Comfort Women Justice Coalition, which has been working for years to erect the statue.

“The issue is women’s freedom from sexual violence, especially from rape and assault during wartime,” she said.

Critics of the movement say that the activists are promoting an unbalanced version of history, and that statues like the one in San Francisco might stoke animosity toward people of Japanese ancestry, more than 110,000 of whom were forced into internment camps in the United States at the same time the Imperial Japanese Army was running its comfort stations.

South Korea, too, has been accused of keeping comfort women. This year, a South Korean court ruled that the government was guilty of detaining women to work as prostitutes for American soldiers during the 1960s and ’70s.

After the San Francisco statue was first unveiled in September, Jun Yamada, the consul general of Japan in San Francisco, said in a statement that “the aim of current comfort women memorial movements seems to perpetuate and fixate on certain one-sided interpretations.”

He added: “This is unwarranted and hardly conducive to objective fact finding and mutual agreement, let alone a final reconciliation. Rather, they are rapidly alienating the entire Japanese public, who could otherwise be sympathetic to the wartime plight of these women, by unduly exacerbating emotional antagonism.”

Judith Mirkinson, the president of the Comfort Women Justice Coalition, said it was fitting that the statue was unveiled at a time when many women are feeling more

emboldened to talk about sexual assault — and when statues have become lightning rods for political debate.

“As we’ve seen over the last year, statues are very meaningful to people,” said Ms. Mirkinson, whose group funded the construction of the memorial. “They represent history.”

Japan’s position on comfort women has been evolving for decades. In 1993, the government officially acknowledged that its wartime military had forced women to work in brothels.

At the time, former comfort women were beginning to speak out more forcefully, and they continued to criticize Japan for refusing to admit to the scope and scale of the abuse. In 2011, a statue portraying a sitting girl with clenched fists was installed near the Japanese embassy in Seoul, where several former comfort women had been staging regular protests.

Since then, dozens more statues have been erected, including some as far-ranging as Australia, Germany and the United States.

In 2015, Japan and South Korea came to an agreement. Fumio Kishida, Japan’s foreign minister at the time, said in a statement that the government of Japan “painfully acknowledges its responsibility,” and that Prime Minister Shinzo Abe expressed “sincere apologies and remorse” to all those who suffered as comfort women.

Japan promised about \$8.3 million to provide medical care and other services to comfort women, and Seoul was asked not to publicly criticize Tokyo over the issue.

But in December, another statue in South Korea — this time in the southern city of Busan — was installed in front of the Japanese Consulate. In January, Tokyo withdrew its ambassador to South Korea and its consul general in Busan. (They both returned in April.)

When President Trump visited Seoul this month, South Korea invited Lee Yong-soo, a former comfort woman from Korea, to Mr. Trump’s state banquet, setting off a formal protest from the Japanese government.

And now there is a comfort woman statue in San Francisco — the first in a major city in the United States.

San Francisco and Osaka have been sister cities since 1957. The relationship is meant to promote cultural exchange, including through special events and student ambassador programs.

Mr. Lee, the mayor of San Francisco, urged Mr. Yoshimura, his counterpart in Osaka, not to cut ties in a letter last month, emphasizing that the partnership was between people, not just governments. “It would be a shame to penalize those who worked so hard to build a strong future of cooperation between our residents,” the letter said.

Ms. Tang said the coalition had received letters of support from people in Osaka who disagreed with Mr. Yoshimura’s position.

“What he’s doing is extremely despicable and shameful, and it is against what we are trying to do in America,” she said. “This is to sensitize people to the issue of women and the kinds of sexual assault that they receive from men in authority.”

Motoko Rich contributed reporting from Tokyo.