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Asahi Shimbun admits errors in past ‘comfort women’ stories

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The Asahi Shimbun admitted Tuesday to serious errors in many articles on the “comfort women” issue, retracting all stories going back decades that quoted a Japanese man who claimed he kidnapped about 200 Korean women and forced them to work at wartime Japanese military brothels.

The correction came more than 20 years after the Sankei Shimbun based on studies by noted historian Ikuhiko Hata first pointed out apparent errors in the man’s account in April 1992.

Hata and the Sankei said there was no evidence supporting the account

of Seiji Yoshida, who claimed he conducted something akin to “human hunting” by rounding up about 200 women on Jeju-do Island in present-day South Korea.

All local residents interviewed by Hata denied Yoshida’s claims. Mainstream historians have now agreed that his statements were false.

Yoshida, who claimed to have worked for a labor recruitment organization in Yamaguchi Prefecture during the war, reportedly died in July 2000.

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has repeatedly called out the Asahi for quoting Yoshida’s accounts, saying the paper’s “erroneous reports” have magnified the issues involving the so-called comfort women.

Asked to comment on the Asahi’s retraction of the articles during his regular news conference Tuesday, Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga said: “We hope correct recognition of the history will be formed, based on objective facts.”

The term comfort woman is a euphemism referring to women forced into sexual servitude in wartime Japanese military brothels. Media outlets and activists often describe them as “sex slaves,” given the harsh conditions they faced.

The Asahi repeatedly reported on Yoshida’s accounts in the 1980s and 1990s.

The paper has faced growing criticism about its coverage of comfort women, prompting the paper on Tuesday to carry two pages of feature articles looking into its previous coverage.

In April and May this year, the Asahi dispatched reporters to the island and interviewed about 40 elderly residents and concluded that Yoshida’s accounts “are false.”

As far as the present-day Korean Peninsula is concerned, the Asahi, like

most mainstream Japanese historians, maintained that no hard evidence had been found to show the Japanese military was directly involved in recruiting women to the brothel system against their will.

But the Asahi, again like mainstream historians, maintained that most “comfort women” from Korea were forced to work as prostitutes against their will since they were recruited by private-sector brokers through human trafficking.

Before winning his second prime ministership in December 2012, Abe had suggested he might revise or retract the key government apology to the women, issued by Chief Cabinet Secretary Yohei Kono in 1993.

But to date, Abe has upheld the Kono statement, which admitted that the Japanese authorities and military were “directly or indirectly, involved in the establishment and management of the comfort stations and the transfer of comfort women.”

“The (Japanese) government study has revealed that in many cases they were recruited against their own will, through coaxing, coercion, etc., and that, at times, administrative/military personnel directly took part in the recruitments. They lived in misery at comfort stations under a coercive atmosphere,” the Kono statement reads.

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