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## Japan's air force chief sacked over WWII claims

**Reporter: Shane McLeod**

MARK COLVIN: Japan's Prime Minister is having trouble with war history after he had to sack the head of the country's air force.

The speedy dismissal of a General who suggested Japan was lured into World War II was supposed to have placated Japan's neighbours and avoided yet another diplomatic flare-up over the past.

But as the Prime Minister Taro Aso has been finding out, his political opponents have used it as a chance to bring up Mr Aso's own connections to wartime history.

Specifically, the use of Australian Prisoners of War at a coalmine owned by the Aso family during the war years.

Shane McLeod reports from Tokyo.

SHANE MCLEOD: The recently departed chief of staff of Japan's Air Self Defence Force isn't toning down the comments that got him sacked.

General Toshio Tamogami was dumped after winning an essay competition with a piece of writing that suggested, amongst other things, that Japan was lured into World War II, and Japan's colonial legacy in China, Korea and Taiwan was largely benign.

He was brought before a parliamentary committee this week, which gave him another opportunity to have his say.

(Toshio Tamogami speaking)

"What I'm surprised about is that I mentioned Japan was a good country and then I was removed

from my position", General Tamogami says. "I feel it's a little strange, it means they want someone for the post who says Japan is a bad country".

The now citizen Tamogami was dumped from his role as chief of staff of the air force, but he was allowed to retire from the force on full pension.

Prime Minister Taro Aso's move to quickly distance the government from the scandal seemed to tamp down criticism from Japan's neighbours. But for Japan's Opposition it's been an opportunity to raise questions about Mr Aso's own ties to Japan's wartime past, which they did in parliament this week.

(Sound of Yukihiisa Fujita speaking)

This is Opposition MP Yukihiisa Fujita, raising questions about the use of Allied Prisoners of War in a coal mine owned by Aso Mining, a company owned by Mr Aso's family.

Among the allied POWs who served in the mine were Australians. Mr Fujita asks Mr Aso whether he recognises there were allied POWs working in the mine during the war?

(Taro Aso speaking)

"I think you know that I was born in 1940", Mr Aso answers, "so at the time I was four or five-years-old. I was too young to recognise these facts, so honestly I didn't know anything at the time about Aso Mining. As regarding those facts now, I understand it hasn't been definitely confirmed".

That's a suggestion that historian and researcher **William Underwood** finds surprising.

He confirmed the links between Aso Mining and the POW labourers two years ago, while completing research for his doctoral thesis in Japan.

**WILLIAM UNDERWOOD:** It's quite remarkable because the documents themselves have been in the public realm for more than a year and the controversy surrounding the forced labour at Aso Mining is now more than two-years-old. So I'm just not sure what additional proof the Prime Minister would require.

**SHANE MCLEOD:** How to deal with his family's past has proven difficult for Mr Aso.

While he was only five-years-old at the end of the war, he went on to become head of the family company in the 1970s before entering parliament.

In 2006 as Foreign Minister, after news of the POW connections emerged, Mr Aso attended a ceremony at a Buddhist temple outside Osaka. The temple conducts a ceremony every year to honour POWs who died in custody in Japan during the war.

Initially the idea was that Mr Aso and ambassadors from some of the countries involved, including Australia, would attend the ceremony along with the minister.

But intense scrutiny, along with questions over whether Mr Aso would or should apologise, led to the ambassadorial invitations being withdrawn. Asked about it in Parliament Mr Aso says the plan was scaled down because he didn't want the scrutiny to overshadow the temple's ceremony.

(Taro Aso speaking)

"Until then it had been held quietly for a long time", Mr Aso says, "and I thought it was most undesirable for the war dead that it should become so noisy just because I went when I was foreign minister".

Even though Mr Aso is having trouble responding to his family's history, Dr Underwood believes it's something he may have known about for some time.

WILLIAM UNDERWOOD: Nobody's alleging that he personally took part in the forced labour enterprise. However, he did run the direct successor company during most of the 1970s. What we have now seems to be sort of a half step forward half step back approach to finessing the issue and just hoping it goes away by itself.

MARK COLVIN: Historian Dr William Underwood speaking to Shane McLeod.