

February 7, 2009

Former Australian POWs seek apology, compensation from Aso

By Julian Ryall in Tokyo

Australian soldiers who were put to work in coal mines operated by the family of Prime Minister Taro Aso during the second world war have this week sent a letter to the Japanese leader demanding apologies and compensation.

Their demands coincide with the discovery of a photograph showing emaciated soldiers outside a facility operated by the Aso family at the end of the war and the imminent release of replies by the government to a seven-page list of questions about the treatment of Allied prisoners of war.

In his letter sent to the cabinet secretariat, dated February 4, John Hall states that as a POW at the Fukuoka Branch Camp No26, he was 'forced to work at the Yoshikuma coal mine, owned by Aso Mining Company'.

'My human rights were severely violated while I was a POW,' writes Mr Hall, of Somersby, in the state of New South Wales.

'In addition, your family's company never paid me properly for my labour.' His letter demands an apology for the 'inhumane treatment' he suffered and the forced labour he performed, an apology 'for neglecting the historical truth about us POWs for the past 64 years', and compensation 'in line with global norms for redressing historical injustices'.

Joe Coombs, an infantry corporal who was captured at the fall of Singapore, is also sending a letter to Mr Aso demanding an apology.

'It's a bit late now, of course, because we should have had an apology and compensation a lot earlier,' said Mr Coombes, 88, from his home in Sydney.

'I'm more optimistic that we'll get an apology than any compensation, but that's easy. Words are cheap.'

Mr Coombes arrived in Japan in December 1942 and worked in the Kawasaki Heavy Industries shipyard in Kobe before being sent to the Aso family mines on the southern island of Kyushu, where the work was 'much more dangerous', he said.

The veterans' campaign is being championed in Japan by Yukihiisa Fujita, the shadow vice-defence minister for the opposition Democratic Party of Japan.

The opposition has already questioned Mr Aso in the Diet on two occasions about his family

company's use of slave labourers, and on January 6 finally won a grudging admission that Allied POWs had been used in its mines between May and August 1945.

Mr Fujita has submitted a seven-page list of follow-up questions to various government ministries and agencies demanding the release of further documents pertaining to the treatment of prisoners and their use as slave labour. Historians, however, expect the Japanese government to continue to make slow progress in releasing the documents.

'The basic gist of recent developments is that the government of Japan does possess lots of documents related to Allied POW forced labour, but the government falls back on its standard 'no documents exist' excuse without ever searching its own archives,' said historian **William Underwood**, pointing out that the records it did release had large parts blacked out.

Mr Underwood believes the Japanese authorities are finding excuses to withhold documentation to nullify compensation claims from Korean and Chinese civilians who were put to work in Aso mines.

Of particular concern are claims from North Korea, which has never signed a peace treaty with Japan, leaving claims for redress 'wide open', he said.