



The long shadow of Japan's POW past

The issue that won't go away has also embroiled the country's prime minister Taro Aso.



By **Justin McCurry** - GlobalPost

Published: July 25, 2009 10:31 ET

TOKYO — The last time Joe Coombs came to Japan, it was as a prisoner of a militarist state. During the final weeks of World War II, he was imprisoned on the southern island of Kyushu and forced to mine coal, unpaid and in appalling conditions.

By the time Japan surrendered on August 15, 1945, he weighed just 99 pounds.

Sixty-four years later, as Japan prepares to mark the anniversary of the end of the war, Coombs has returned in search of justice.

The 88-year-old veteran of the Australian Army arrived at Yoshikuma mine via the Kawasaki shipyards in Kobe after being captured at the fall of Singapore in 1942.

He was made to perform backbreaking work for up to 15 hours a day, seven days week. Food was scarce and outbreaks of disease were common. Perceived insubordination and laziness were punished with a rap over the back of the head with a rifle butt. He saw at least two of his fellow Australian POWs die.

POW accounts of brutality at the hands of the Japanese are not unusual, of course. But Coombs's plight comes with a twist: the owner of the mine, in which he and 196 of his compatriots worked alongside 101 British and two Dutch servicemen, was owned by Takakichi Aso, father of Japan's current prime minister, Taro Aso.

For years, the prime minister refused to acknowledge that his family firm, then called Aso Mining, had used POWs as well as thousands of Chinese and Korean forced labourers.

But earlier this year he was forced into an embarrassing about face after Yukihiisa Fujita, an upper house member of the opposition Democratic party of Japan (DPJ), uncovered proof that Aso Mining had used POW labour between May 1945 and the end of the war.

Even before Fujita discovered the dusty documents in the bowels of the welfare ministry, Aso's attempts to distance himself from his family's shady past rang hollow.

He served as president of the mining company's successor, Aso Corporation, from 1973 to 1979, and a 100-year history of the company published during his tenure conveniently

overlooked the POWs.

Yet he still refuses to apologize or even to meet Coombs and relatives of dead POWs whose labour contributed to his family's enormous wealth.

"Aso repeatedly says he has no personal recollection of the war's end, but he was president of the successor to Aso Mining," said William Underwood, an American historian who has spent years uncovering the truth about the Aso mines. "He has airbrushed the POWs out of history. Where is the corporate social responsibility?"

<!--pagebreak-->

Coombs and James McAnulty, whose father, Patrick, worked at Yoshikuma mine, are demanding "monetary compensation in line with global norms for redressing historical injustices."

But on his recent visit to Japan, Coombs, who lives on an Australian government disability pension, said: "At this stage of my life, compensation is secondary. I would be happy to forget about compensation and concentrate on the apology."

Previous attempts by ex-POWs to win redress failed in Japanese courts, which ruled that all claims were settled by postwar treaties between Japan and its former enemies.

On their recent visit to Japan, Coombs and McAnulty toured the former site of the mine and met Aso Corp. officials, who, despite the evidence, declined to confirm the use of POWs or grant them a meeting with the current president, Aso's younger brother Yutaka.

McAnulty died in 1971 at the age of 62, "a broken man" who tried to suppress his hatred of the Japanese by gardening and talking about his experiences to his young son at their home in Scotland.

"As a son of an Aso POW I believe I've got the right to be heard," James McAnulty said. "I witnessed every day my father's ill treatment and how it affected him. As a young boy I remember the horror stories of the humiliation, the starvation and the cruelty. He was a survivor but he still remained a victim."

Aso Corp.'s silence contrasts with other modest, but significant, attempts to right wartime wrongs. Its business partner, Lafarge Cement in France, is building a memorial on the former site of a WWII deportation camp in southern France it bought in 1998, even though it played no part in wartime wrongdoing.

In May, the Japanese ambassador to the U.S. apologized to former American POWs who had taken part in the Bataan Death March in the Philippines during WWII. And earlier this month the University of California said it would bestow honorary degrees on hundreds of former students of Japanese descent who were sent to internment camps during the war.

Coombs' best hope may lie in a victory for Fujita's opposition party at the general election on Aug. 30.

In a recent meeting with Coombs and McAnulty in Tokyo, the DPJ's leader, Yukio Hatoyama, apologized and indicated he would be "sympathetic" to demands for recognition and voluntary compensation.

Fujita said: "Our party believes we should take responsibility for the past. If we can't do that, then we can't take responsibility for the future."

The United Nations has made 2009 the International Year of Reconciliation. A gesture from Aso, weeks before he is expected to lose the election, would be a welcome, if long overdue, contribution. As Coombs said: "An apology would help the pain go away."

Other stories on Japan:

[North Korean tests scare Japan](#)

[Full Frame: Walking through fire, literally](#)

[Land of rising debt](#)

Source URL (retrieved on *July 25, 2009 14:35*): <http://www.globalpost.com/dispatch/japan/090723/the-long-shadow-japans-pow-past>