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**Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil,
political, economic, social, and cultural rights,
including the right to development**

Joint written statement* submitted by Japan Society for History Textbook, International Career Support Association, non-governmental organizations in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[25 January 2022]

* Issued as received, in the language of submission only. The views expressed in the present document do not necessarily reflect the views of the United Nations or its officials.



We request overturning the unjust decision adopted by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage Committee (WHC) adopted a decision on July 22, 2021, which stated with “strong regret” that Japan failed to fully implement the promise it made at the time of inscription to the World Heritage regarding the “Sites of Japan’s Meiji Industrial Revolution,” including the Hashima Coal Mine (popularly known as Battleship Island) in Nagasaki City. This decision was made based on information far removed from the facts and demonstrated extreme bias. The decision therefore defames the dignity of the Japanese people and is truly unjust. We cite the reasons why this is the case.

1. The Japanese Government has fully implemented its commitments

The Japanese Government promised at the time of inscription to set up an information center and to take adequate measures to remember victims. Following this promise, the Industrial Heritage Information Center (IHIC) was established in Tokyo. At the Center, concise primary sources together with testimonies of those who worked together with workers from the Korean Peninsula before and during the War are displayed, with explanations of what exactly happened at that time, including victims of accidents. Clear existing records of disasters at the coal mines are shown, without regard of the victims’ nationalities. Thus, the Japanese Government faithfully implemented the promise it made at the time of inscription.

2. Unfair decision made based on unilateral information

UNESCO and International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) set up a joint investigation team of three experts and carried out a survey in June 2021. Only researcher Dr. Judith Herrmann visited the IHIC in person. Prior to Dr. Herrmann’s visit to Japan, UNESCO and ICOMOS held consultations with the Government of the Republic of Korea, at least twice, and, furthermore, UNESCO staff were provided in advance with ample documents by Korean anti-Japan civic groups and Japanese anti-government civil groups.

Moreover, the World Heritage Committee accepted testimonies of Koreans approved by the Republic of Korea’s Government, while at the same time ignored testimonies made by Japanese who worked with Koreans at the time.

We must say that, at this time, the WHC decision, based on biased sources, information and testimonies, with a lack of opportunity for the Japanese Government to respond, is extremely unfair.

3. Political use of UNESCO by the Republic of Korea Government and civic groups

At the end of October 2018, the Republic of Korea Supreme Court ordered Japanese company Shinnittetsu Sumikin (currently Nippon Steel) to pay compensation to South Koreans who claim to be former mobilized workers, for having forced them into slave labor. Since then, similar lawsuits popped up, like mushrooms after a storm. In all cases, Japanese companies were ordered to pay compensation and a huge amount of Japanese property was foreclosed.

The issue of compensating Korean workers who worked in Japan before and during the war was resolved, “completely and finally,” by the “Agreement Between Japan and the Republic of Korea Concerning the Settlement of Problems in regard to Property and Claims and Economic Cooperation,” concluded in 1965. To order Japanese companies to pay compensation or to foreclose on their property is a violation of international law. Yet, the Republic of Korea Government upholds these verdicts.

The Republic of Korea Government complains about displays at Japan's Industrial Heritage Information Center because their overriding goal is to attain a diplomatically advantageous position over Japan. By making wild claims to a world audience about Japanese "forced labor," the South Koreans diminish Japan's international standing. It is patently obvious that the Republic of Korea is using UNESCO as a political weapon in its diplomatic conflict with Japan.

Moreover, Japanese anti-government civic activists hope to smear the Japanese Government by raising objections to the exhibits at the IHIC—again using UNESCO as a weapon for political purposes.

4. Submitted materials full of distortions and fabrications

Almost all of the materials and testimonies submitted to UNESCO and ICOMOS by civic groups and the Republic of Korea Government have problems of credibility and authenticity. Among the submitted materials, there is a photograph that claims to be "evidence of abused Korean workers in Battleship Island" (skinny men covered with injuries). This, in fact, is a photo that accompanied an Asahikawa Shimbun article, a local Hokkaido paper, in northern Japan, dated September 9, 1926. The article reported on abused Japanese workers at a road construction site--it had nothing to do with Korean workers at all. Another photo shows a nearly naked man with a pickaxe, digging coal. It was taken at a different coal mine, not on Battleship Island, at different time, several decades ago. This coal miner is also Japanese and not Korean. The primary Korean spokesman, Mr. Goo Seoncheol, confidently stated that Korean workers were abused on Battleship Island. However, there is no record that he ever lived in Battleship Island. Former residents of Battleship Island asked to speak directly with Mr. Goo, but he declined.

5. There was no illegal forced labor

Japan annexed the Republic of Korea in 1910 and Koreans became Japanese citizens. They bore the rights and responsibilities of all Japanese citizens. All citizens were obligated to comply with "conscription" during the war and this was entirely in accordance with international law at the time. The International Labour Organization's Forced Labour Convention of 1930 (No. 29), which Japan ratified in November 1932, states that any work or service exacted in the event of war are exempt. Former residents who worked in the coal mine on Battleship Island before and during the war stated that Japanese and Koreans lived on good terms and that there was no abuse or violence directed at Koreans. Battleship Island Korean workers who were repatriated to the Republic of Korea went back to Battleship Island after the war, seeking high-paying work. To claim that Koreans were abused in Battleship Island is simply a distortion of history with the intent of tarnishing the honor of former islanders.

To summarize, the present UNESCO decision is an unjust one imposed on the Japanese Government. UNESCO's decision was based purely on materials submitted by the Republic of Korea Government, politically motivated South Korean anti-Japan civic groups and Japanese anti-government civic groups, none of whom have any knowledge of the true history of Battleship Island.

We, in the name of simple justice, sincerely request that the United Nations Human Rights Council and human rights treaty bodies use extreme caution in reviewing materials delivered by countries and civic groups using historical and human rights issues for purely base, political purposes and to withdraw a decision that was not based on historical facts, for the honor of former residents of Battleship Island and for the people of Japan.

International Research Institute of Controversial Histories (iRICH), NGO(s) without consultative status, also share the views expressed in this statement.