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Human rights situations that require the Council's attention

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.

[23 January 2026]

* Issued as received, in the language of submission only.

An Appeal to the International Community Regarding Violations of Freedom of Expression and Human Rights in the Republic of Korea

For a long time, the Republic of Korea has upheld liberal democracy and the rule of law as its fundamental national principles. It has consistently emphasized to the international community that it is a society in which diverse opinions coexist and in which minority voices are respected and protected under the law. However, the reality currently unfolding in the Republic of Korea reveals a serious divergence from this self-portrayal. It is precisely this gap that we seek to bring to the attention of the international community through this statement.

1. President and Social Media ~ Pressure from State Power

We, “Citizens' Action for Revocation of Comfort Women Law (위안부법 폐지국민행동)”, are a small group of citizens who have engaged in purely private academic and civic activities, researching historical sources on the so-called “comfort women issue” from perspectives that differ from the prevailing mainstream narrative, and sharing the results of our research with the public. Over the past several years, our activities have had no connection whatsoever with violence or intimidation, and our assemblies and expressions have likewise been conducted in a strictly non-violent and non-coercive manner. Nevertheless, we are now being treated as “criminals” in the Republic of Korea, and are subjected to organized and comprehensive pressure from both state authorities and the media.

The situation began on January 6, 2026, when President Lee Jae-Myung, during an overseas visit, quoted a specific media report on his personal social media account and characterized our activities as “defamation of the deceased.” This single remark by the highest authority in the country immediately became a signal flare.

Subsequently, the National Police Agency released a press statement entitled “Strict Response to Illegal Acts Targeting Comfort Women Victims.” In this document, various alleged criminal suspicions—none of which had even been factually verified—were listed in a definitive and conclusive tone, and a specific police station was immediately designated as the “central investigative unit” for our case.

From the very outset, the investigation appeared to proceed as though its conclusion had already been predetermined. The presumption of innocence was nowhere to be found, and we were treated not as subjects of investigation, but as objects of punishment. Search and seizure operations were repeatedly conducted, and even materials used for lawful expressive activities were confiscated in bulk. Our families and acquaintances, overwhelmed by the daily flood of media reports calling for “severe punishment,” were gripped by fear and continuously urged us to suspend our activities. This constituted not merely a personal hardship but a grave form of psychological pressure imposed upon citizens who exercised their freedom of expression, as well as upon their families.

2. Double Standards Toward Civic Activities

A more serious problem lies in the media. Numerous media outlets, without verifying the facts or providing us with any opportunity to respond, labelled us as “Statue of Peace terrorists,” “anti-comfort women forces,” and “hardline far-right extremists.” This was not reporting, but branding; not criticism, but demonization.

By contrast, with regard to the illegal acts committed by opposing groups who obstructed our assemblies and expressions and exercised physical force, the media repeatedly adopted a lenient and equivocal stance, phrased in terms such as “it may be so.” In law enforcement and judicial judgment alike, a clear double standard is in operation.

The object of our criticism has never been specific individuals, nor the comfort women as individuals. What we have consistently questioned is a social structure that fixes historically unresolved issues as a single political and moral “correct answer,” and drives all voices that criticize or question this narrative into the categories of hatred and criminality. In particular, we have raised concerns about the reality in which the “Statue of Peace,” installed in large numbers in schoolyards and public spaces throughout the country, is not treated as a subject open to historical debate, but rather as a sacred and untouchable domain beyond criticism.

In this process, we expressed our views by placing a mask and a placard on the statue and then taking photographs. There was no violence and no damage. Nevertheless, this act was defined as “insult” and as an “illegal assembly,” and became the subject of search and seizure operations and criminal investigation. By contrast, acts of idolization such as placing masks on the statue while offering bouquets of flowers, or putting umbrellas over the statue on rainy days, have been beautified and protected. Can such standards truly be regarded as fair and acceptable in a liberal democratic state?

3. Coercion and Threats by State Power

What is currently taking place in the Republic of Korea is not merely the repression of a single civic group. It is a dangerous precedent in which state power designates a particular direction of historical interpretation as the sole “correct answer,” and suppresses minority opinions that diverge from it through police authority and the threat of criminal punishment. It demonstrates how easily individual freedom and human rights can be undermined when the President’s public condemnation, the police’s preemptive stigmatization, and the media’s collective attacks converge.

We are not a violent organization. We are citizens who sought to convey truths that must be corrected, based on the research findings of scholars who have studied modern and contemporary history and the comfort women issue over the past several years, as well as on primary historical sources. If, merely because our conclusions differ from the prevailing mainstream narrative, we must be excluded and punished to this extent by the state and by society, then the democracy of the Republic of Korea is nothing more than an empty shell.

4. Our Appeal to the Human Rights Council and the International Community

In the Republic of Korea today, merely for expressing “different opinions,” individuals are subjected to public condemnation by the President, intensive police surveillance and tailing, wiretapping and house searches, and are branded by the media in a manner tantamount to a social death sentence. This constitutes a clear violation of freedom of expression and a serious infringement of human rights.

We will never yield to unjust pressure. However, we have reached the limits of appealing against this injustice solely within the Republic of Korea. We therefore respectfully request that the United Nations Human Rights Council and the international community, which uphold freedom and human rights, pay close attention to this case, and lend their concern and voices so that the Republic of Korea may remain a nation that conforms to the democratic standards it has long proclaimed.

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