

Security Council Open Debate on the Maintenance of International Peace and Security: War, its lessons, and the search for a permanent peace, 29th January 2014, Security Council Chamber

Statement by Mr. Oh Joon, Permanent Mission of the Republic of Korea to the United Nations

Let me begin by thanking you and the Jordanian presidency, Sir, for organizing today's open debate. I also thank Under-Secretary-General Jeffrey Feltman for his comprehensive briefing.

With this year marking the centennial of the First World War, the theme of today's debate is both timely and relevant. This debate enables us to reflect anew on the scourge of past conflicts and lessons learned. We would also like to seek ways to prevent conflicts and consolidate peace for future generations. While several factors can be cited as triggers for the outbreak of the First World War, we cannot deny that parochial nationalism and mistrust among States led to the war. There was an obvious lack of understanding and tolerance among the parties to the conflict. On this centennial anniversary, we believe that genuine recognition of and remorse over past wrongdoings is the first step towards preventing another war and securing durable peace. George Santayana, the American philosopher and poet, famously said that those who did not remember the past were condemned to repeat it. The fact that the world witnessed the horrors of the Second World War, only two decades after the first, illustrates humankind's failure to learn from the lessons of history.

Unfortunately, in our region of North-East Asia, tensions are rising more than ever before due to the distrust among States. In large part, that stems from the fact that the Japanese leadership has a distorted view of what happened during the time of imperialism. In Europe, for example, in striking contrast to Asia, Germany's steadfast efforts after the Second World War to come to terms with its past served as the basis for genuine reconciliation with other countries, paving the way towards European integration. Japan, however, has not been able to properly address or break away from its militarist past. That is the underlying reason behind many of the recurring conflicts over historical issues in the region.

Recently, many Japanese leaders have continued to show an attitude of historical revisionism by paying tribute at the Yasukuni shrine, where its past history of aggression is glorified, by making irresponsible remarks that the definition of aggression has yet to be established and by passing on distorted historical views to its next generation through revised school textbooks. Japanese political leaders' worshipping at the Yasukuni shrine, where wartime leaders convicted as Class A war criminals during the Second World War are enshrined, is a direct challenge to the foundation on which Japan rejoined the international community in the post-war world. Such remarks and actions undermine future-oriented relations and peacebuilding among nations in the region. They also run counter to the objectives and spirit of the United Nations, which reflect the aspirations of peoples for peace after experiencing the most horrendous war in history.

Recently, the Japanese Government emphasized its contribution to global peace with the policy of a proactive contribution to peace. However, one cannot but wonder how Japan can play such a role, when it is actually creating more troubles with countries in the region. If Japan seriously wishes to contribute to regional and global peace, it should refrain from provoking its neighbours with its denial of history.

A matter that is a serious concern not only for East Asian countries but for the entire international community itself is the so-called comfort women issue. In the United Nations, the issue has been discussed in the context of women's rights, the exploitation of women in conflicts, war crimes and the prevention of torture, among others. Indeed, Sunday, 26 January was a very sad day for the Korean people. A woman passed away who had been taken by force by the Japanese Imperial Army to suffer as an enforced sex slave. That leaves the total number of surviving comfort women at 55. The comfort women issue, which is at the core of the pending problems between Korea and Japan, is also an important universal women's rights issue.

The United Nations reports of the 1990s submitted by Ms. Coomaraswamy and Ms. McDougall (E/CN.4/1996/56, E/CN.4/Sub.2/1998/13) stated that the comfort women issue was one of sexual slavery in armed conflicts, requiring the acceptance of legal responsibility, compensation and the punishment of perpetrators. In 2007, the Congress of the United States and the Parliament of the European Union passed resolutions, respectively, calling on the Japanese Government to accept historical or legal responsibility, apologize and pay compensation. As such, enforced sexual slavery represents a breach of the conscience of humankind.

The Japanese Government has yet to take responsibility for the issue. At the General Assembly last year, the Japanese delegation mentioned Japan's contributions to the victims of sexual violence in armed conflicts. But it said nothing about the comfort women. If their definition of the victims of sexual violence in armed conflicts does not include comfort women, is that a case of double standards or a denial of the past? The Japanese Government should urgently pay heed to the calls of the victims of its crimes and the international community. It should act by instilling a spirit of peace and reconciliation in its younger generation by correctly teaching the lessons of history.

Having said all of that, I still believe that we should look to the future. History should move forward. We need to move on. But in order to do so, if for no other reason than moving on, we should face history and learn from its lessons.