

JAPAN

Victims never speak of themselves

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AUGUST 15 in Japan is the day to remember those who had fallen victim during country's long period of Pacific War. The Pacific War in Japan started in 1937, two years before the start of World War II in European battlefields, and ended on 15 August 1945, a little over five months after the guns had fallen silent in the western arenas of that Great War. The human casualty that Japan had to endure as a result of the ambitious military dream of country's then leadership counts 2.5 million military personnel as well as 800,000 civilians. All those who had fallen are considered victims in Japan and they are remembered every year on 15 August not only by members of bereaved families, but also by country's leading political figures, as well as ordinary citizens.

But remembering those who had to die as a result of a war later termed as an aggressive maneuver both at home and abroad had never been an easy task for Japan. Among the fallen also included are those who were responsible for death and destruction in parts of Asian continent during the period of war. As a result, the memorial observance in Japan often gets a morbid touch of its own. This particular characteristic of the anniversary is further tainted by the acts of a number of country's leading political figures, who seem to derive a perverted satisfaction through some of their activities that easily provoke and



outrage people who had to endure untold sufferings due to aggressive military maneuvers by the wartime leadership of Japan. This year's anniversary was also no exception, except that the Prime Minister held

up to his earlier commitment of not visiting the controversial Yasukuni shrine on the day of the anniversary.

The Yasukuni shrine, situated at the centrally located Kudan area of Tokyo, is in the heart of a contro-

versy surrounding Japan's collective memory of war. The shrine, built during the Meiji era, is dedicated to those who died in war for the imperial cause and was at the forefront of Japan's official propaganda machinery throughout the war period, fuelling patriotic upsurge among citizens centering around officially patronized state Shinto religious fervor. Enshrined in the shrine, among the souls of millions of soldiers who had never asked to die, are also spirits of those who had massacred civilians in China, the Philippines and elsewhere, tortured prisoners of wars, abused sexual slaves, and murdered workers seemed to be too weak to sustain hard labor. This hard reality itself turns the shrine into a political centerpiece with the potentiality of arousing serious controversy on the issue of Japan's collective memory of a war, which is seen by others as a serious misconduct of a nation eager to extend its influence over neighbors.

Japan's late Emperor Hirohito was the first among country's post-

war leaders to visit Yasukuni shrine and revive the old tradition of worshipping the dead. His visit to Yasukuni in late November 1945 was also one of the last imperial visits to the shrine, as the torch was later duly handed over to the leading political figures soon after the directive disestablishing State Shinto was issued on December 15 the same year. Those politicians have since then turned the practice of visiting the shrine on August 15 as one of their most important sacred yearly rituals that also regularly become headline stories in the media in Japan as well as in other countries.

But despite such pomp and publicity surrounding visits by important political figures, the anniversary rituals at the Yasukuni do not have any official touch at all. Those who visit the shrine mainly go there on private capacity and except a few controversial political figures; thousands of people who visit the shrine on August 15 to pay homage to the dead are mostly ordinary Japanese citizens. Among them most visible are of course those belonging to extreme right wing political groups dreaming to revive what they see as the past glory of Japan, as well as some aging war veterans carrying the war time flag of the imperial Japanese navy. But the majority simply join the ranks of visitors without having any distinct political likings either for the shrine or its tainted past.

Japan's official part of remembering country's fallen citizens during the Pacific War takes place on the same day at Nippon Budokan Hall, situated only a few blocks away from Yasukuni. This year too, the government-sponsored ceremony at Nippon Budokan was graced by the presence of the imperial couple, as well as the prime minister and other dignitaries. Unlike the noisy and crowded atmosphere at the Yasukuni shrine, Nippon Budokan offers a much somber and solemn mood that goes in tune with the significance of the day. This year's program started a few minutes before noon with the musical orchestra under the supervision of one of Japan's leading conductor, Kenichiro Kobayashi, paying tribute to those who had given their lives. This was followed by the national anthem Kimigayo and the official speech of Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi.

In his brief speech, Koizumi renewed Japan's expression of remorse for country's wartime aggression and pledged to pass a peaceful Japan to the next generation. Stressing on the fact that Japan caused great damage to people in many countries, especially Asian nations, he said he believes passing on a peaceful Japan to the next generation would be the best way to pay tribute to the war dead. The Prime Minister's speech was followed by a minute of silence just at 12 noon. The emperor then delivered his ceremonial speech in which he offered his condolence to the war dead as well as his prayer for world peace and Japan's continued progress. The programs concluded with the placement of flowers by the representatives of different segments of the society at the specially prepared altar. Representatives of relevant government organs and offices, political parties, country's 47 prefectures, as well as important social, cultural and business organizations each placed a single yellow chrysanthemum remembering the victims.



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mentarians' group also visited the shrine.

There is nothing wrong in remembering those who have fallen victim in war and atrocities committed in the name of a particular state or ideology. Among the dead there are many who didn't have any way to refuse what they were told to do, and also there are no shortages of those who probably would have dissented, should there be an opportunity for them to do so. Remembering them at a shrine like Yasukuni should also not stand as a problem as long as the option of portraying the victim as actors without having any control over their destiny remains open.

But by enshrining all victim en masse, including those who were found guilty of committing crime against humanity, Yasukuni precisely puts a firm barrier in the vacuum between what is right and what is wrong in the whole process of the collective memory of Japan's heavily tainted past. Here probably lies the root of the problems associated with the shrine. And through their overt gesture of paying homage to the victim at Yasukuni, Japanese politicians are no doubt playing a political game in the disguise of taking a moral standing. And by doing so, they are no doubt violating that particular clause of Japan's constitution that clearly separates religion from acts of political nature. But at the same time, when gaining popular support becomes the eventual target in the rough and tough game of politics, there hardly remains the option to give a serious thought about such petty fallouts.