

# Japanese Minister Apologizes for WWII Brutalities

*Official makes a careful speech noting suffering, but defends premier's visits to war shrine.*

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**By Bruce Wallace**

TOKYO — With his country facing increasing diplomatic isolation from its closest neighbors, Japan's hard-line foreign minister Wednesday offered uncharacteristically soothing words of apology for wartime brutalities, while warning China to stop making Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi's visits to the militarist Yasukuni Shrine an obstacle to better ties.

"To stop doing what he has continued to do just because of what China has said or what newspapers have said is not something that a prime minister of a country should do," Foreign Minister Taro Aso said after delivering his first major speech since taking the post six weeks ago. Aso is one of Japan's most outspoken nationalists, and his first weeks as minister have been punctuated by sharp exchanges with China and South Korea over the degree of Japanese remorse for its imperialist past.

Aso's comments come at a time when a soon-to-be-released government poll shows public attitudes toward China hardening.

Advisors said Wednesday's speech was meant to offer a diplomatic balm before two major gatherings of Asian leaders next week, at which Koizumi's requests for sideline "summits" with China and South Korea have been rejected. The two countries have made it clear that their snub of Koizumi is a result of his Oct. 17 visit to Yasukuni, a Shinto shrine in Tokyo that honors the souls of 2.5 million military dead, including those convicted of war crimes after World War II.

Aso has been one of the most outspoken defenders of the Yasukuni visits. But his speech, billed as the unveiling of an "Asian strategy" that stakes a Japanese claim to regional leadership, included a carefully crafted apology for past aggression.

"We must continue to reflect deeply and with a spirit of humility, because it brought great suffering to innocent people in the countries of Asia, notably the Republic of Korea and China," Aso said.

But he later complained that only China and South Korea were critical of the shrine visits. He did not mention criticism by Singapore's leaders and some U.S. politicians.

"There is no country that prohibits honoring the war dead for their sacrifice," he said.

A 25-year political veteran, Aso was long ago branded a maverick for his unapologetic nationalism. His appointment as foreign minister was seen as a signal that Tokyo intended to play a more assertive international role and roiled feelings in the South Korean government, which last week tried to embarrass the minister by demanding that Japan release documents relating to the alleged use of forced Korean labor at the Aso family's coal mines during the war era.

Yet many of Aso's formerly controversial positions have become mainstream as Japanese public opinion

continues to shift rightward. On his first day as foreign minister, Aso joked with officials that he was now a middle-of-the-road politician.

He is also considered a possible — if still a longshot — successor to Koizumi if the prime minister retires as planned next September.

Aso's rising influence reflects the hardening attitudes among many Japanese toward China. Although economic and cultural relations between the two countries are rapidly expanding, political dealings have become frosty. Beijing has warned that the pall will remain as long as Japanese leaders persist in visiting Yasukuni, arguing that the visits betray a lack of remorse over Japan's brutal colonial rule.

But many Japanese are pushing back against what they see as Chinese meddling in the purely Japanese matter of how to honor their war dead. An annual poll conducted by the prime minister's office in October and due to be released at Christmas will show a further drop in the percentage of Japanese who say they like China.

The percentage of those who say they feel warmly toward China dropped to less than a third this year. Two years ago, 48% said they felt that way.

Fewer than one in five Japanese now say relations with China are good, down from about 47% two years ago.

The slide worries Japanese officials, who fret that the booming trade with China will be affected.

Attempts to make Yasukuni just one issue among many appear to be failing. Last week, Chinese Ambassador Wang Li warned a Tokyo audience that the dispute over the shrine had to be resolved, not set aside.

That view was echoed Wednesday by Ra Jong Yil, South Korea's ambassador in Tokyo, who said that just as the Statue of Liberty represented U.S. values to the outside world, Yasukuni threatened to become the defining symbol of resurgent Japanese nationalism, "rubbing salt to the old wounds, scratching the old wounds so they would not heal." But the Koizumi government appears paralyzed over Yasukuni, unwilling to risk a nationalist backlash that might accompany steps to calm its foreign relations.

On Wednesday, Koizumi said next year's budget plans did not include any money for a feasibility study on the widely suggested solution of building a secular war memorial that would exclude the worst war criminals and could serve as an acceptable alternative to Yasukuni.

The prime minister dismissed concerns that China was freezing Japan out of influence in the rest of Asia.

"China is the one who decided to postpone the talks — that is fine with me," he said. "Yasukuni isn't something that can be used as a diplomatic card. If China and South Korea try to use it as a diplomatic card, it won't work."