

To Counter Japan's Distorted History Textbook: "Dokdo Issue Can Never Be Tolerated, It Is Matter of Korea's Sovereignty"

While boldly ignoring Korean and Chinese warning, Japan approved the final versions of new textbooks retaining history distortions and adding further claims to Dokdo. On April 5, 2005, the Japanese Education Ministry announced the approval of textbooks from eight publications after revising controversial contents pin-pointed by neighboring countries, including South Korea, North Korea and China.

The South Korean Foreign Ministry summoned Japanese Ambassador Toshiyuki Takano on April 6 and lodged a strong complaint against Japan's approved textbooks, demanding a retraction of contents that describe the Korean-controlled Dokdo islands as Japanese territory.

"Japan's explanation that the Dokdo contents were included under the exclusive decision by the publishing companies counters reports from Japan, and our government has great concern toward it," Vice Foreign Minister Lee Tae-shik told Takano during their 45-minute meeting.

Lee asserted that the latest textbooks pose a more serious problem as they violate Korea's sovereignty by claiming Dokdo belongs to Japan. Emphasizing Korea's resolution to block the claim, Lee demanded that the Japanese government make efforts to end the deepening history feud.

Amb. Takano said in response, "The Japanese government's position that Japan inflicted massive pain and damage to Asian countries by the colonization and invasion has not changed." He denied that the Japanese government issued any order to textbook compilers to include Dokdo as being under Japanese sovereignty.

Foreign Minister Ban Ki-moon confronted his Japanese counterpart Nobutaka Machimura and questioned the Japanese government's role in the new textbooks claiming the Korean-controlled Dokdo islands in the East Sea. On the sidelines of the Asia Cooperation Dialogue (ACD) meeting in Islamabad, Turkey, Minister Ban also demanded that the Japanese government flex its authority to retract "inaccurate" Dokdo descriptions from the textbooks for the sake of healthy Korea-Japan relations.

At the meeting, Ban made it clear that Seoul would not tolerate Tokyo's moves to lay claim to Dokdo, the rocky islets in the East Sea, that the Japanese textbooks refer to as Takeshima. "We doubt the Japanese government's determination for a future-oriented partnership between the two countries as the Japanese textbooks fortified their descriptions of Dokdo," Ban was quoted as telling Machimura.

The foreign ministers' meeting was the highest-level contact between the two countries since the current diplomatic row flared up in mid-February. The meeting was viewed as a crucial opportunity to improve fast-deteriorating bilateral relations over Japan's renewed claims to

sovereignty over Dokdo (The Japanese call the islands Takeshima.)

"I cannot tolerate Japan's claim to Dokdo, not only as the foreign minister but also as a member of the nation," said Minister Ban. "I demand that Japan erase all of the Dokdo descriptions in the textbooks immediately." Ban said before leaving Incheon International Airport, "If Japan fails to make amends and face the truth, it is difficult to collaborate for the future of Northeast Asia."

At an emergency ministerial meeting, South Korean government declared that it has no choice but to take firm countermeasures against persistent Japanese attempts to glorify wartime atrocities. "The Korean government expresses grave concern over some of the textbooks that claim Dokdo's sovereignty. It is a rationalization of Japan's colonial invasion in the past and a denial of Korea's liberation," said the Foreign Ministry spokesman Lee Kyu-syung.

At the meeting, an issued statement said, "The Korean government again demands Japan's efforts to fundamentally change the textbooks that still rationalize the past wrongdoings and beautify its imperialist past. It will deal separately with other distortions in the textbooks and the revived claims to the Dokdo islands in the East Sea that are considered a challenge to Korea's sovereignty."

After the ministerial meeting to map out countermeasures, the Korean government decided to deal separately with the historical and territorial problems (two-way approach), another senior government official said. "We found some improvements in the history textbooks, though many are left still problematic. But the Dokdo issue that can never be tolerated as it is a matter of sovereignty."

The government has short and long-term measures against the textbooks, with the collaboration of the Education Ministry, Home Affairs Ministry, Maritime Ministry and the Korean Overseas Information Service. Weekly pan-government meetings on counter-measures will continue.

Japan's junior high schools are to select textbooks by August out of the eight authorized versions for use for the 2006 semester. Only a fraction of schools (less than 0.1%) adopted the first edition of the Fusosha textbook in 2001. But the combined adoption rate of the Fusosha, Tokyo and Osaka textbooks reaches 65-70% of the total.

"That means 7 out of every 10 Japanese students will learn the distorted account," a government official in Seoul said on condition of anonymity. "We might have to prepare for a longer battle than expected."

Two of the three textbooks, published by Tokyo Publishing Co. and Osaka Publishing Co. with a 65% combined circulation, have each added a new text noting that sovereignty of the islands is disputed with Korea. A controversial textbook on society compiled by Fuso Publishing Co. and authored by radical rightists retained a description of Dokdo as Japanese territory and added a picture of the islets.

Japan's action in 1905 came at the end of the Russo-Japanese War. It then occupied Korea in

1910 until its 1945 World War II defeat. A history textbook compiled by Fusosha, which was criticized mostly by Korea and China in 2001 for excessive history distortion, contains some changes but still has a significant amount of misinterpretations and omissions.

Examples include a chapter that says Japan helped Korea's modernization through colonization. The Fusosha history textbook, in particular, depicts Japan as aiding in the modernization of Korea, describes years of provocation on the part of China and explains the Japanese military action that led to the war as "in accord with" China.

They also glossed over the suffering of Asian people, including hundreds of thousands of Koreans who were forced into labor, military service and sexual slavery for imperial Japan during World War II.

The Japanese Ministry of Education and Science controls the content of its school history textbooks to a certain extent. Every public and private school individually selects one history textbook from a list of seven or eight authorized by the ministry every four years.

To be on the government list, each publishing company's textbook must pass inspection before it is allowed to be marketed to each school board. Japan's junior high schools are to select textbooks by August this year out of the eight authorized versions for use from the 2006 semester.

While lashing out at the Japanese government's decision to authorize the history textbooks that reflect some rightist groups' problematic rendering of the country's imperialistic past, civic organizations and scholars in Korea moved to assume the role they can play to best deal with the revisited dispute. By encouraging the conscientious voices within the Japanese people, they will continue to put pressure on Japanese schools not to select the textbooks in question.

"Now that the textbooks are author-ized by the Japanese ministry, we will concentrate on campaigning against the textbooks, dissuading Japanese schools from choosing those books," it said in a statement jointly issued by 14 civic groups from Korea, China and Japan. Four years ago, only 0.039% of the regions selected the controversial history textbook compiled by Fuso Publishing Co., due to an active protest by many Japanese parents and teachers against history distortion.

When the first row over, the Japanese history textbook erupted back in 2001, the conscientious forces in Japan, heralded by the Children and Textbooks Japan Network 21 and joined by some Korean and Chinese groups, appealed to the people in Japan, saying that the textbook in question showed no repentance or apology for the damage and sufferings Japan had caused to Asian countries and should not be taught to the children.

After the 2001 textbook row, about 200 scholars, teachers and historians in Korea, China, and Japan have joined their hands with an aim to set up joint recognition of history among the three nations and prepare positive solutions for conflicts rather than criticize one another.

South Korea is setting to exert more aggressive diplomatic efforts to curb Japan's bid to become a permanent member of the UNSC, the top decision-making body currently composed

of five veto-wielding countries including the United States, Russia, Britain, France and China. Another Seoul official said that as long as Japan shows no sincerity over the historical and territorial issues that strained its relations with neighboring countries, there would be no support for it to join the UNSC at all.

North Korea strongly denounced Japan's UNSC bid, saying, "the country [Japan] is not even qualified to remain a member of the world body. In a signed commentary, "Minju Chosun", a newspaper published by the North's Cabinet, claimed that the UNSC seats can neither be bought nor occupied by a country that does not repent for its war atrocities.

"Japan is a country that does not even have the very basic qualifications of a member state of the United Nations, let alone the U.N. Security Council," the commentary said.

On April 6, a top North Korean legislator denounced Japan's claim to a set of South Korean islets in the East Sea, arguing that the islets have always been a part of Korea. Choe Tae-bok, chairman of the North's Supreme People's Assembly, said that Japan has committed the unthinkable and is unable to abandon its insularism.

Choe also denounced Tokyo's approval of school textbooks that critics in both Koreas believe gloss over Japan's brutalities during its colonization of Korea from 1910 through 1945. He said that such distortion of historical facts would only result in Japan's isolation from the international community.

"If Japan continues to distort history like this, it will give bad impressions of Japan in the international community. Japan will find it difficult (in its campaign) to become a permanent member of the U.N. Security Council," he said.