

Japan: Korean 'comfort women' photo exhibit sabotaged

A South Korean photographer explains his ordeal in holding an exhibition in Japan that documents ageing 'Comfort Women', writes Lee Yoo Eun.



Ahn Se-Hong, a South Korean photographer was harassed leading up to and during his exhibition in Japan, where he displayed pictures of ageing "[Comfort Women](#)", a term used for Korean women that were drafted as sex slaves by the Japanese during the World War II. Ahn disclosed that he is [facing threats](#) from Japanese right-wing groups, who held protests against the photo exhibition.

On his [Facebook page](#) [ko] photographer Ahn Se-Hong (ahnsehong) revealed that during his exhibition, he was closely watched, placed under surveillance and his visitors were thoroughly searched by security hired by Nikon, the Japanese camera maker, who also owned the building where the exhibit was on display.

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Nikon first refused to sponsor the location and abruptly cancelled the event a month ago. However, Nikon eventually succumbed to the Tokyo District Court order to sponsor the location. News media [speculated](#) Nikon's abrupt cancelling of the exhibit was an attempt to fend off the controversy and [pressure from conservative groups](#).

The South Korean online space erupted with rage and countless users accused Japanese extremist right-wing groups of not only refusing to admit their war crimes, but attempting to sabotage the art exhibition.

Ahn's show *Layer by Layer: Korean Women Left Behind in China who were Comfort Women of the Japanese Military*, shows faces of innocent victims who were dragged into inexplicably horrid situations in their teens or early twenties, now wrinkled and crippled. During Japanese colonisation, approximately 50,000 to 200,000 Korean women were kidnapped and forced to leave their homes to become military sex slaves. Less than 70% of these women managed to return home.

Ahn [wrote](#) [ko] on his Facebook page on June 26, 2012 with the photo above. The post has been shared for over 900 times:

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"I arrived at the Nikon exhibit salon today happy, to prepare for the photo exhibit, but as I entered the place, I realized this is not the picture I had in my mind. Nikon claimed that they will be merely renting out their space without doing anything, but no, they've done far more than that: They blocked media's entrance and forbid media coverage and even individual's from taking photos. Furthermore, Nikon dispatched three lawyers who closely followed and watched me. These lawyers kept overhearing my conversations and recorded me. I've suppressed (my anger) just for my visitors. But I felt as if I were living under the past Japanese Imperialist rule. The reason Nikon let their lawyers stay with me throughout the entire exhibition was to find an excuse to halt my exhibition."

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A regular visitor (supposedly Japanese National) being searched by security hired by Nikon upon entering the photo exhibit. Image posted on Ahn's Facebook. Used with Permission.

He [added this comment](#) [ko] with the photo above.

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"This is a clear violation of human rights. I am so sorry for everyone who came to see my exhibit."

There were small rallies of right-wing groups held in front of the exhibit. Ahn wrote he was expecting such pressure from the start. Last week, Ahn [wrote](#) [ko]:

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"I will be starting the photo exhibit from next week. Now in Japan, right-wing groups' strong attacks have already started. Someone threatened me and said/wrote I should take care of myself and the severity of their threat has moved up a notch."

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Another user [Ahn Hyun shared](#) [ko] her experience on Ahn's Facebook wall.

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"I could not find any information about the exhibit at the building entrance nor on the Nikon website. When I opened the door to the Nikon salon exhibit, security came to me and they started opening our bags and we were searched with a metal detector. In the morning, several right-wing groups held protests and created commotion. When they tried to hand me a complaint pamphlet but failed, they stirred up even more commotion. Many news outlets came to cover the story, but Nikon blocked us from even having a conversation with journalists, claiming it is forbidden to cover news inside the building. When I fled from the building to escape the eyes of securities, two Nikon personnel followed us outside the building and watched us. Several people endowed flowers to those old ladies [note: referring to comfort women, not clear whether it was given to the women or endowed in front of the photo of the ladies]. But Nikon blocked people from giving flowers. Some donations were made by people - Nikon's lawyers are keeping that, saying those are problematic. Everything was so irrational and pushed me to the verge of anger."

But there was [support from](#) [ko] Japanese citizens:

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"Countless people visited the exhibit. Some of them showed support for me and many Japanese people showed condolences to these old ladies. I feel both confused and rewarded throughout today. However, another right-wing protest is planned tomorrow. I don't know how much commotion they will stir up and how long Nikon's surveillance will continue, but neither of these tactics can beat the people supporting these old ladies."

Many users, such as [@iron heel](#), [tweeted](#) [ko] said that they will start boycotting Nikon.

This is not the first time extremist Japanese right-wing groups have enraged Koreans, Chinese and other Asians, who suffered prior and during the World War II, when Japan colonised Korea and occupied parts of China. On June 21, [this Youtube video](#) of some of right-wing members driving a stake into the statue of Comfort Women sparked controversy. They referred to the women as "prostitutes".

These groups are also [gathering signatures for a petition](#) [ko] to remove [a monument commemorating Comfort Women in the United States](#), fueling an old animosity between Japan and

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South Korea once again.

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