

Japanese emperor leaves Ontario to face possible controversy in B.C.

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<http://www.cbc.ca/canada/toronto/story/2009/07/10/japan-emperor.html>

The Canadian Press

By Sunny Dhillon



Steve Peters, Speaker of the Ontario legislature, left, greets Japanese Empress Michiko, centre, and Emperor Akihito, right, during their visit to Queen's Park on Thursday. (Canadian Press/Darren Calabrese)

As Japanese Emperor Akihito and Empress Michiko arrived to delighted spectators at Ontario's provincial legislature Thursday, community groups in Vancouver unveiled an open letter calling on the emperor to do more for Japanese victims of the Second World War.

The letter says the Japanese parliament must pass a resolution that fully admits and apologizes for the country's role in the loss and suffering of millions

While the coalition stopped short of demanding Emperor Akihito issue an apology, it said his words could have a real impact for the victims.

"The current emperor mentioning an apology or expression of regret over the past war can, of course, influence the Japanese people or Japanese government's behaviour," said Satoko Norimatsu, director of the Peace Philosophy Centre.

Emperor Akihito and Empress Michiko are scheduled to arrive in Vancouver Friday. Their visit is to celebrate the 80th anniversary of the establishment of bilateral diplomatic relations between Japan and Canada.

The letter, spearheaded by the Association for Learning and Preserving the History of WWII in Asia, says efforts by the multi-ethnic groups to raise awareness of the wartime atrocities in Japan have been hampered.

"As Canadians with Asian connections," the letter reads, "we also work together to heal the wounds of Japanese aggressions in the Asia-Pacific region before and during the Second World War, and to learn from the history of devastating wars to create a peaceful future together."

'Tragic chapter'

"While our educational activities have been well-received among communities in Canada, Asia and beyond, we have witnessed many non-reconciliatory responses from Japan to the global community's efforts to help bring healing and justice to the war crime victims of this tragic chapter of history."

Norimatsu said the number of people of Asian descent executed between 1931 and 1945 could be in the millions, though some historians dispute that figure.

In addition, she said justice must be served for the women of the era who were forced into sex slavery. Up to 200,000 "comfort women," as they were called, were rounded up into military units.

"The comfort women were mostly young women, mobilized from around the Asia-Pacific," Norimatsu said.

"They were sometimes kidnapped, but often they were told that there was a good job. Many of the poorer girls went because they thought there was a good job there."

Norimatsu said the women would sometimes be forced to have relations with 30 or 40 soldiers per day.

Once-in-lifetime opportunity

In Toronto, Emperor Akihito and Empress Michiko met with Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty before thrilling hundreds of supporters by shaking hands with them.

Hiroko Rowen's hands were trembling as she shook the empress' hand — a moment she described as a rare, once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

The royals arrived at Queen's Park after visiting a children's hospital and meeting with Lt.-Gov. David Onley.

The royal couple also spoke with the premier about strengthening relations between the two countries, and discussed Japanese poetry.

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