

Simply apologising for the slave trade deflects us from the wrongs in today's world, writes Deep Kisor Datta-Ray

Going beyond 'sorry'

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's apology for his nation's wartime sex abuse in China, Korea and elsewhere will encourage those who are celebrating the 200th anniversary of the abolition of slavery by demanding a formal apology. The sentiment is understandable and reparation should be made, wherever possible. But the assumption that a simple "sorry" absolves past injustice makes light of slavery and exploits history to distract attention from today's wrongs.

The slavery debate is organised around two opposing narratives. On one side, the apology lobby argues that the Atlantic slave trade between Africa, Britain and America was a uniquely and absolutely immoral process whereby whites deliberately dehumanised blacks. The traffic's enormous profits paid for Britain's industrial revolution, created western financial systems and endowed European cultural institutions. Contemporary Africa's plight and the condition of blacks in the west are blamed on slavery. Europeans should expiate their guilt, runs the demand.

A contrary interpretation is advanced by the vindicators, who argue that slavery occurred in a different moral universe, where all but a lucky few suffered harsh and cruel lives. Africans who sold fellow Africans were equally complicit. Britain seized the high ground with the 1807 Abolition Act, withdrawing from the trade in spite of self-interest and the mores of the time.

This lobby further claims that two centuries is far too long for blacks to maintain a state of victimhood that prevents pragmatic treatment of the real problems that afflict black communities in Africa and elsewhere. An apology is ridiculous, they say. As for reparations: how would they be paid, and to whom?

US President George W. Bush adopted the apologist position when his fulsome retrospective condemnation denounced slavery as "one of the greatest crimes of history", and he paid tribute to the descendants of slaves. "The very people traded into slavery helped to set America free," he declared. His piety glossed over the facts that segregation officially continued until the 1960s, that racism is a clear factor in American life, and that statistics show that blacks are the most underprivileged social group.

With just a few words, Mr Bush

silenced the American "sorry" industry without achieving anything. His words had no impact on social ills that can only be corrected if the ruling elite faces up to uncomfortable truths about our layered and oppressive world – by drafting policy that benefits the poor and invests in society's exploited sections. But the presidential apology made excellent political capital. At the same time, it deflected attention from the real problems that the underclass in the American and African continents suffer today.

This is not to say that past wrongs should be shrugged off. Neither does it justify the vindicators, for the slave trade's dividend is daily manifest in western life. The processing and distribution of tobacco, sugar and cotton produced on investments in European and American ports, quays, warehouses, factories and

halls, literary trusts and publishing houses funded from slavery's profits all be abolished? Or should hypocrites take over so that an apology makes no difference to enjoying the fruits of inhumanity?

Slavery should be remembered for man's callousness to man. Using it as a political fig leaf to shroud present inequality compounds the wrong. What is required is not a "sorry", but an effort to draw on historical memory to solemnly promise to end the multiplicity of exploitations that still exist.

The world wants constructive action, not token gestures.

Deep Kisor Datta-Ray is a London-based historian and commentator on Asian affairs

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banks. Cities grew on the back of this trade. Europeans living in the centres of the slave trade – London and Amsterdam – salted away their profits in banks such as Lloyds, which financed slavery. They enjoy visiting the British Museum which started with a collection of 71,000 artefacts collected by Sir Hans Sloane with money made on his wife's Jamaican plantation. Britain's great liberal prime minister, William Gladstone, came from a family whose fortune was made from slavery.

So deeply is modern European life implicated in the trade that a simple "sorry" sounds facetious.

Follow-up action to saying "sorry" is hardly practical. It would demand an impossible balance sheet. How does one assess reparations for a company that began with the slave trade but is now a global corporation employing non-Europeans? For that matter, what about magnificent cultural institutions such as the British Museum? Should concert and theatre



Frank Ching

frank.ching@scmp.com



History enshrined

Premier Wen Jiabao (温家宝) is scheduled to visit Japan next week at the invitation of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, in the first such high-level visit in seven years. Both sides want it to be a success so that relations, badly strained during the leadership of Junichiro Koizumi, can be improved. Mr Wen has described his forthcoming visit as an "ice-thawing" trip, following Mr Abe's "ice-breaking" trip to Beijing in October. The relationship is now at a delicate stage, and both sides hope to return to a state of normality.

China's leaders refused to meet Mr Koizumi after he insisted on making annual visits to the Yasukuni Shrine, where Japan's war dead, including executed war criminals, are enshrined. To finesse the history issue, Mr Abe has declined to say whether he will visit the shrine while in office. But the situation is still delicate, especially since Mr Abe has repeatedly denied that the Japanese military was involved in forcibly recruiting women to work as sex slaves during the second world war.

Only a few days ago, documents were released showing that, in the 1950s and 1960s, the Japanese government was involved in planning the honouring of war criminals at Yasukuni. Government officials asked the shrine authorities to handle the matter discreetly and not to make public announcements about it. Previously, government officials had taken the position that, since the shrine was privately operated, they could not tell the shrine authorities what to do.

Although Mr Abe has responded to the latest disclosures by saying that it was the shrine authorities – not the government – who made the final decision to honour the war criminals, it is clear that the government initiated the whole process. This suggests that Japanese officials, while saying that they accepted the decisions of the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal, never really accepted that Japan was in the wrong.

The one Japanese administration that seemed to issue an unequivocal apology for Japan's acts in the second world war was that of the socialist prime minister, Tomiichi Murayama, in office from 1994 to 1996.

It has frequently been pointed out that, unlike Germany, its wartime ally, Japan has never come to terms with its responsibility for the Pacific war. In Germany it's a crime to deny the Holocaust, while in Japan, government officials and ordinary citizens routinely deny all kinds of things, such as the "comfort women" and the Nanking massacre. And while the German

government has apologised and paid compensation for forced labour, Tokyo fights such cases in court.

Only last week, a Japanese court rejected a demand for compensation by a group of Chinese forced to work as slave labourers at a Japanese mine during the war. The Miyazaki district court dismissed the suit, which sought damages from the Japanese government and Mitsubishi Metals Corporation, on the grounds that the deadline for filing compensation claims had expired.

As historian Francis Fukuyama wrote recently: "Japan has never had a genuine internal debate over its degree of responsibility, and has never made a determined effort to propagate an alternative account to that of Yushukan" – the military museum attached to the Yasukuni Shrine, which depicts Japan as a victim of western colonialism eager to help fellow Asian countries counter such oppression.

Japan stresses that, for the past 60 years, it has been a good global citizen, involved in no wars. This is true but, unless Tokyo is prepared to acknowledge its past, the rest of the world may find it difficult to face the future with Japan.

Mr Wen and Mr Abe will, no doubt, seek to resolve major problems besetting them, such as the dispute over gas fields in the East China Sea which, if not resolved, might lead to clashes at sea.

However, the past will never be buried until Japan is willing to bite the bullet and confront it. As the *Asahi* newspaper said in an editorial on Monday: "A nation must face up to the facts of history, no matter how painful."

Frank Ching is a Hong Kong-based writer and commentator

Other Voices

A bridge over troubled waters

Mark Valencia

The Malacca and Singapore straits are hazardous to navigate. There were 44 collisions and 15 groundings there between 1995 and 2005. According to Japanese estimates, traffic in the already congested straits is projected to increase dramatically from 94,000 ships in 2004 to 141,000 ships in 2020, with all the attendant negative consequences. The majority of vessels do not call at any straits-state ports – in Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore – so the three receive no direct benefit from their passage.

Yet they bear the brunt of the burden in providing for safety of navigation, and the costs of pollution from accidents. Therefore these states, and Japan, which depends on the straits for delivery of Middle East oil, are exploring ways to share the costs of maintaining safety of navigation.

Meetings among states that use or border the straits have produced a list of six projects to improve navigation safety. But financial support is voluntary and, other than long-term contributor Japan, the only other user state to offer concrete assistance is China.

Hope of more rapid progress emerged last month when the chairman of Japan's Nippon Foundation, Sasakawa Yohei, suggested that a voluntary fee of US 1 cent per deadweight tonne (the weight of a vessel's cargo) be solicited from all ships transiting the straits. These fees, estimated at up to US\$40 million a year, would be used to establish a Malacca Strait Fund for maintaining and improving navigational safety. This idea has considerable merit because it would spread the burden equitably among users. The cost per ship per transit is not great, and should not significantly affect freight rates.

In what amounted to a breakthrough, the director general of the Japan Shipowners' Association said the organisation would support the scheme, and other ship-

ping associations said they would consider it. There are still many issues to be addressed before the next official meeting of the International Maritime Organisation on the topic in Singapore, in September.

Among them are: first, hosting and control of the fund. The straits states – or at least Indonesia and Malaysia – will likely want to host and control the fund, while Japan and other users will want input, transparency and accountability.

The second issue is unity among the straits states despite diverging interests. Singapore's economic livelihood and political independence is dependent on continued use of the straits by maritime powers. Thus, its interests overlap those of user states more than those of Indonesia and Malaysia, which are primarily concerned with sovereignty and the environmental impacts of pollution caused by ships.

The third point involves voluntary versus "mandatory" contributions. Maritime powers and most shipping associations oppose a mandatory fee in principle, but a voluntary system may not work.

Finally, contrasting long-term views must be considered. Japan appears to think that the continuous improvement of navigation systems can accommodate the ever-increasing number and size of vessels using the straits. But Indonesia and Malaysia perceive a "tipping point" for maritime traffic – regardless of improvements.

The bottom line is that after many years of frustration and shop talk, there has been movement to address these issues. With patience, goodwill, a sense of corporate social responsibility and enlightened national self-interest – as well as skilful diplomacy – the equitable burden-sharing for the safety of navigation in the Malacca and Singapore straits may become a reality.

Mark Valencia is a visiting senior fellow at the Malacca Institute of Malaysia. Distributed by Pacific Forum CSIS

What about those poverty-relief vows?

Kemal Dervis

Resources for development must increase and the increases must be sustained if we are to keep the promises that have been made to the world's poor and to achieve the UN's Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). However, at the midpoint on the road to the target year of 2015, the growth of resources for development has stalled.

Nearly seven years ago, the world came together and agreed to bring to bear both the political will and the necessary resources to address one of the biggest challenges facing the world: the fight against extreme poverty. World leaders cemented their commitment when they signed up to the MDGs, setting out ambitious, but attainable, goals to significantly reduce poverty, tackle health challenges, promote gender equality and safeguard the environment by 2015.

In the years that followed, the appetite for "making poverty history" gained real momentum: in 2005, the Group of Eight leading industrialised countries and the European Union pledged to increase aid significantly by 2010. However, the dramatic increase in development assistance that year – which reached a record US\$106.8 billion – was due largely to debt-relief grants to Iraq and Nigeria, and aid for tsunami-affected countries, instead of aid directly financing growth and development.

Development aid, on the rise since 1997, decreased last year by 5 per cent, stopping what had appeared as a strong upward trend in the face of extreme poverty. What is startling is that the inadequate assistance is becoming apparent precisely when an increase in aid is needed to confront issues that disproportionately affect the poorest countries.

This includes issues such as climate change, which is already affecting the lives of people in the developing world as water supplies become more unreliable.

A study by the Organisation for Eco-

nomic Co-operation and Development shows that if all donors respected their commitments, official development assistance from members of the OECD's Development Assistance Committee would rise from just under US\$80 billion in 2004 to US\$130 billion by 2010. To hit that target, aid would have to increase faster than almost any other form of public expenditure: by 11 per cent every year from next year to 2010.

As a former treasury minister in my native Turkey, I recognise the fiscal constraints governments face. But citizens in donor countries increasingly understand that poverty and insecurity in one part of the world directly affects their own lives. An investment in aid is an investment in building a better and safer world for all. This development assistance must also be driven by strong, nationally owned strategies focused on inclusive growth.

The good news is that developing countries are also taking concrete steps to make aid resources go further. The African Union's New Partnership for African Development, for example, has helped contribute to economic responsibility and has strengthened monitoring policies across many African countries.

At the mid-point towards the 2015 deadline to achieve the MDGs, G8 countries and other donors have the opportunity to fulfil the commitments made on a global partnership for development. It is an opportunity we cannot afford to miss.

As the 23 members of the OECD's Development Assistance Committee gather at their high-level meeting in Paris this week, ministers from donor countries and heads of agencies have an important opportunity to ensure that commitments made on fighting poverty and promoting sustainable development are kept.

Kemal Dervis is the administrator of the UN Development Programme and chair of the UN Development Group

The Red Lantern

David Eimer



No-go zones

The press have been attempting to flex their muscles on the mainland recently, with contrasting fortunes for two very different people. Guo Degang (郭德纲) is a famous comedian who has been pilloried for advertising a fake medicinal product. Wu Ping (吴萍) was an unknown, middle-aged woman from Chongqing (重庆) until a couple of weeks ago, when her battle to save her ramshackle house from demolition transformed her into a media darling.

Guo's fall from grace has been spectacular. It began on March 15, World Consumer Day, when CCTV aired a programme exposing a best-selling slimming aid as bogus. Guo was paid either 2 million or 3 million yuan – depending on which paper you read – for being the face of the product's TV commercials. CCTV savaged him for colluding in duping the public by using his popularity to promote the product.

As the rest of the media rounded on him, Guo fought back via his blog and in an interview with the *Beijing Youth Daily*. It's the job of the State Food and Drug Administration, he said, to judge whether any TV ad makes misleading or false claims.

Meanwhile, Ms Wu was becoming a media heroine. The saga of her "nail house" – slang referring to residents who refuse to move from their homes – attracted the attention of newspapers, TV stations and netizens across the country. Ms Wu's tough-minded refusal to leave her house until she'd been offered adequate compensation was a juicy David-and-Goliath story that touched a chord with mainlanders. But it became political once newspapers started running editorials about Ms Wu as the first test of the much-vaunted new property law, passed last month. On March 24th, all mainland papers reportedly received a notice from the State Council Information Office, saying there was to be no more reporting on the "nail house".

Bloggers who travelled to Chongqing kept the story alive, though, and used their mobile phones to provide images. Such citizen journalism wasn't an option for *Caijing*, the mainland's leading business magazine, when its March 5 issue failed to appear. Its cover story on the potential impact of the property law seems to have made someone, somewhere, nervous.

Another controversial story also vanished from the headlines suspiciously quickly last month. Reporters from a TV station in Hangzhou (杭州), Zhejiang province (浙江省), decided to test how corrupt local hospitals were, and passed off tea as urine samples. Six of the 10 hospitals visited took the bait and told the reporters they had infections and needed expensive medication.

Skewering the mainland's inadequate health-care system in such a way was a rare example of a genuine mainland media exposé. But just as the authorities tried to bury the Chongqing "nail house" story, so the Hangzhou hospital scandal died a quick death. No officials commented on it.

In contrast, the saga of Guo and the fake slimming aid has run and run. Celebrities are fair game for media criticism. It's official policy that remains off limits.

David Eimer is a Beijing-based journalist



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