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Francis, in Korea, might meet with 'comfort women'

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NCR Today

Francis in Korea

Korean women forced to work at Japanese military brothels during World War II have been invited to a Mass that Pope Francis will celebrate on Aug. 18 during his planned visit to South Korea, Korean news agencies are reporting, citing an announcement by the Korean papal preparatory committee.

Addressing the so-called "comfort women" and possibly meeting with them could have international implications, as the issue remains highly charged in Asia. Seven decades after the conclusion of World War II, war memories linger and the women have symbolized divisions between the Japanese and other Asian peoples. Koreans and Chinese women made up most of the ranks of these sex slaves. Meanwhile, their governments have been unsuccessful in obtaining compensation for the Japanese actions.

Estimates of "comfort women" have run from 20,000 to 200,000 or more. Only a relative few of these women remain alive today.

Francis is reportedly expected to deliver a message to the invited women during a Mass of reconciliation at Cathedral in central Seoul as part of his Aug. 14-18 pastoral mission.

The idea Francis might say something has stirred headlines in newspapers across Asia.

The trip will be Francis' first visit to Asia since he was elected in March 2013. It will be the first papal visit to South Korea since 1989, when John Paul II traveled there. About 11 percent of the South Korean population is Catholic; many other South Koreans are members of Protestant churches.

Earlier this year Korean lawmakers petitioned the Vatican, requesting that Francis say something about

the issue. Meanwhile, many Japanese lawmakers and historians deny the existence of the 'comfort women.'

The women, mostly Korean and Chinese women and girls, some as young as 14, were abducted from their homes and forced into sexual slavery by the Japanese troops during World War II. Victims have testified that they were raped up to 40 times daily.

Comfort women still alive today continue to demonstrate each Wednesday in front of the Japanese embassy in Seoul.

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