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## 'Comfort women' bill gets new life

By **MARIKO KATO**, Staff writer

The new administration must ensure the Diet passes a bill recognizing the women forced into sexual slavery for the Japanese military during the war if it is to form the East Asian Community proposed by Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama, nine ruling party lawmakers said Wednesday.

"If we don't solve this problem, it would be impossible for Japan to speak out to East Asia on an equal standing," Megumu Tsuji of the Democratic Party of Japan said at a meeting attended by a former "comfort woman."

The meeting was organized by the citizens' group Japan Network on Wartime Sexual Violence Against Women.

Since the early 1990s, some former sex slaves, known euphemistically in Japan as comfort women, have filed lawsuits demanding an apology and direct compensation from the government.

Since 2001, a nonpartisan group of lawmakers in the DPJ, Social Democratic Party and Japanese Communist Party have repeatedly submitted bills to the Diet calling for a government apology and steps to restore the women's dignity, which includes paying them compensation. The DPJ now runs the government, with the SDP as a member. Several prime ministers have issued statements and letters of apology to former sex slaves since the 1990s, but the women and their supporters say the gestures have not been sincere.

The government also helped set up semigovernmental Asian Women's Fund in 1995 to deliver compensation to the victims, but many of them refused the money because it was not directly from the government.

Eight Lower House lawmakers from the DPJ and another from the SDP spoke at Wednesday's meeting in a Lower House office building, attended by the former sex slaves and activist groups from South Korea and Taiwan.

A JCP lawmaker also joined the meeting.

The politicians agreed that Japan won't be able to create the Hatoyama-pitched East Asian Community without first solving the sex slave issue.

"If we are to form an East Asian bloc in the real sense, wartime compensation must be dealt with first," SDP member Ryoichi Hattori said.

Lee Yong Soo, an 80-year-old South Korean former comfort woman who has long campaigned for Tokyo to recognize her experiences, also expressed hope that the new administration addresses the issue quickly and earnestly.

"There is not much time left. I want the government to solve the issue while I am still alive," said Lee, who was taken from her home in 1944 at age 15 to work as a sex slave in Taiwan.