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THE AMERICAS

Peru: Japanese Latin-Americans Fight US Over WWII Internment Redress

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LIMA, Peru (AP) - Augusto Kague was only 12 when the U.S. government reached far south to his Peruvian farming town and tore his family apart.

It was January 1942 -- a month after Japan attacked the American naval base at Pearl Harbor, killing 2,400 and drawing the United States into World War II. The roundup of 110,000 Japanese-Americans had begun.

But internment efforts went far beyond U.S. borders -- a little-known fact to this day.

Kague's father, a Japanese immigrant in Peru, was whisked away by security agents, one of 2,264 men, women and children of Japanese ancestry arrested in Latin America and shipped off to U.S. camps. They were interned under the guise of securing Western Hemisphere interests, including the Panama Canal. About 800 were used in prisoner swaps with Japan, turned over to a country that some -- as Latin American-born descendants of Japanese immigrants -- had never seen.

Now, 20 years after Japanese-Americans won redress for their imprisonment, a small community of Peruvians continues to seek justice with the help of the American Civil Liberties Union and a grass-roots activist effort based in Northern California.

The group thought it had a breakthrough when a U.S. House Judiciary subcommittee set a July 31 hearing on a bill that would mandate an investigation into the internment of Japanese-Latin Americans and propose remedies.

But the hearing has been canceled, and a spokesman for U.S. Rep. Xavier Becerra, D-Los Angeles, the bill's sponsor, said it's unclear when it would be rescheduled.

"This was a big violation of human rights and they don't want to recognize that," said Kague, now 78. "We just have to keep waiting. I've been waiting a long time already."

The hearing would have been just one step in a decades-long battle. The U.S. government didn't include Japanese-Latin Americans when agreeing in 1988 to apologize and pay \$20,000 to

interned Japanese-Americans. The government offered \$5,000 and an apology 10 years ago as part of a settlement agreement for a lawsuit filed on behalf of Japanese-Latin Americans.

While some took the settlement, Kague was one of hundreds who refused it as unfair. His youngest brother, who was born in a Texas internment camp, got \$20,000 as an American citizen.

Three more lawsuits were filed and thrown out, according to the Campaign for Justice, a San Francisco Bay Area coalition seeking redress. The campaign in 2003 also filed a redress petition with the human rights arm of the Organization of American States that is still pending.

Like their counterparts in the U.S., imprisoned Japanese-Latin Americans had little ties or allegiance to Japan. Kague's father cooked Peruvian food in his own restaurant. His mother was the daughter of a hacienda owner in northern Peru. The children spoke Spanish and only a few words of Japanese.

Brazil, Panama, Bolivia and other Latin American countries deported people of Japanese ancestry and allowed the U.S. to strip them of their citizenship.

But the prejudice was particularly virulent in Peru, where many Japanese arrived in the late 1800s mostly to farm and by the 1940s ran thriving businesses.

"Some of the wealthy families of Peruvian society were always jealous of the progress of the Japanese," said German Yaki, 76, who spent a year in the Crystal City, Texas, internment camp.

Yaki's father was a car salesman for General Motors in Lima when the police hauled him away on Jan. 12, 1943. Months passed with no word before the family received a letter.

"He said: 'I don't know where I'm being taken. But one thing's for sure: I'm no longer in Peru,'" Yaki said.

Women and children joined the men in prison camps after losing their breadwinners.

Kague's mother fell behind on payments and lost the restaurant. She sold her jewelry and her furniture and, before long, they were homeless.

It took almost three years before she was able to board a U.S. Navy ship with her six children to New Orleans and reunite the family in Crystal City. A seventh child was born in camp.

When they arrived, internees were stripped of their passports and sprayed with DDT, a now-banned pesticide.

"We were sprayed down like we were animals," Kague recalled.

After the war, their home countries didn't want them back. Many went to work in labor camps for New Jersey's Seabrook Farms and were eventually granted work permits.

Alicia Nishimoto, 73, whose father was a cotton plantation owner from Peru's central coast, spent 18 months in Crystal City with her family. Her parents did not have Peruvian citizenship and had one option: to return to her father's hometown of Hiroshima, where the U.S. had just dropped an atomic bomb.

"There were some people who still had not recovered," she said in a telephone interview from California, where she now lives. "You'd see them on the street. There was no medication. They had maggots on their bodies."

Kague was one of very few able to return to Peru because his mother was a native. His parents in financial ruin, Kague helped support them by taking a job 900 miles from his family in a small bodega in Lima. He's now a successful restaurant owner in the port of Callao.

Many in the community worry that time is running out for the redress fight.

Grace Shimizu, whose father was taken from Peru and interned in Texas, has campaigned vigorously, appearing before Congress several times.

A San Francisco Bay Area resident and one of the founding members of the Campaign for Justice, Shimizu notes her father died in 2004 without receiving compensation.

"For us, time is of the essence," she said. "Our people are dying."

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