

With 2,000 Letters in Tow, Redress Seekers Begin March to D.C.

Japanese Latin Americans who were taken from their homes during World War II are asking President Clinton to include them under the Civil Liberties Act of 1988.

By TAKESHI NAKAYAMA
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The Campaign for Justice, a coalition of civil rights and community organizations, held a send-off party, "Adios to Tears," Thursday night to wish good luck to a delegation which will travel to Washington, D.C. on March 8 to lobby for reparations for Latin American residents of Japanese descent who were forcibly removed from their countries during World War II by the United States government and brought to this country to be interned.

The delegation, made up of Japanese Latin Americans and their supporters from the Campaign for Jus-

stice, will deliver more than 2,000 letters to President Clinton urging him to settle a lawsuit filed against the government to provide redress to those Japanese Latin Americans who were denied compensation by the Justice Department's Office of Redress Administration (ORA).

The Campaign for Justice will meet with congressional representatives and key community leaders to gain their support on this issue.

Emcee Ayako Hagihara of the National Coalition for Redress and Reparations (NCRP) thanked the many organizations that kept the Campaign for Justice going—the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), Japanese American Citizens League (JACL), Japanese Pe-

ruvian Oral History Project, the Crystal City Assn., NCRP, and Bob Sakaniwa, JACL's Washington representative, who is arranging for appointments with lawmakers in the nation's capital.

The nine-member delegation to Washington includes Japanese Peruvians Carmen Mochizuki, Alice Nishimoto, Art Shibayama and Grace Shimizu; Julie Small, media coordinator for the Campaign for Justice; Hagihara and Kay Ochi of the NCRP; Robin Toma, a civil rights attorney; and Fred Okrand, legal director emeritus of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU).

Nishimoto, 62, who was 9 years old at the time her family was deported from Peru in March 1943, told the 123 people in attendance at the Don Felix Peruvian Restaurant

in Hollywood that her family had a good life in Peru until the wholesale deportation of Nikkei.

"Then one day, everything changed. We lost everything, even our homeland. (It was) such injustice, such an indignity for my parents," she said.

The Latin American Nikkei were rounded up by their government and shipped to New Orleans, then

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to Crystal City, Texas, where they were interned until the end of the war, and some until 1947.

"We thought the Civil Liberties Act of 1988 would include everybody, but most of us [Japanese Pe-

ruvians] were denied. It was really ridiculous. I can't believe it," she said. "Because we weren't U.S. citizens or permanent residents at the time or born in camps, we were classified as illegal aliens."

Nishimoto added, "We want justice and dignity for our parents. They didn't just lose property, they lost their dignity. Their lives were destroyed. We can't let that happen again."

Luisa Kaneshiro, 54, was only a year old when her family was forced to leave Peru along with more than 2,000 other residents of Japanese ancestry. Peruvian au-

thorities first took away her father because he was prominent in the Lima Japanese community.

After languishing in a government detention camp at Crystal City

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until the war ended, her father, embittered by Peru's treatment of Japanese, decided to stay in the U.S. But the rest of the family returned to Peru after the war.

"Life was awful. I remember it like a nightmare. It was like Lima didn't have sunshine, it was so gray," Kaneshiro said. "My mom was all alone with two little kids. She suffered so much. And the Peruvians treated us like the enemy."

Kaneshiro never saw her father until she turned 18 and came to the U.S. on a student visa to attend East L.A. College. "When I met him in 1960, I didn't know him. It was like looking at a stranger. I didn't feel anything. That was very sad," she said.

Following five years of study in the U.S., she returned to Peru. Nine years later, she came to live in Los Angeles.

"I thought the [Nikkei] Peruvians would be compensated," said Kaneshiro. "What the United States did—I can't tell if it was the U.S. or Peru, or both—was wrong. I think the Japanese Peruvians should get redress. And I think Peru should apologize."

Toma, who filed the lawsuit on behalf of the Nikkei Latin Americans, said the plaintiffs are waiting for the government to reply. "We know we can't wait for the courts to resolve the case ... The ORA is coming to an end in 1998, and people

redress while folks can see it."

"We're going Washington to get the leadership, including the president, to do the right thing. We need to let the president know, we have to settle this case ... This is not the kind of case the government should be fighting," Toma said.

John Tsuchida, a professor at Cal State Long Beach, stated, "This is not just a Japanese Latin American issue, it's an American issue. The government has an obligation to make the corrections ... If the Department of Justice's interpretation of the Civil Liberties Act is absurd, we have to do something about it."

Small, Campaign for Justice's media coordinator whose boyfriend's father is from Peru and suffered through the injustices, emphasized, "We can make it happen. The next step is Washington, D.C. And after that, you might see us at the United Nations."

Jorge Watanabe, a Japanese Peruvian who lived through the deportation and internment at Crystal City from the age of 7, said, "We didn't really realize the consequences of camp then. They took my father first in a camp in Arizona. Years later I heard the reason was for prisoner exchange purposes."

Jorge and his family were in Crystal City until 1947, because the family didn't want to go to Japan and couldn't go back to Peru. "[Not allowing us to return to Peru] was an excuse for them to take our prop-

"It's really ridiculous to say we were illegal aliens when they brought us here," stated Hector Watanabe, Jorge's younger brother and Westside resident who was 3 years old at the time. "I want to see justice done."

The Watanabes became U.S. citizens and received their redress checks, but they were at the dinner to lend their support to the campaign.

Richard Katsuda, president of NCRP-Los Angeles, said, "This is almost like the beginning of the redress campaign, where people have so much energy to give. It's kind of a mini-revival of the redress movement. We in NCRP are doing whatever we can to help out. I'm very confident we will win."

Gary Mayeda of JACL, one of the founding organizations in the Campaign for Justice, stated, "JACL is doing whatever we can—letter-writing campaigns and outreach—to help the campaign."

Mayeda, whose father was interned at Heart Mountain and once told him that the Japanese Latin Americans "really got screwed," added, "When all of these organizations work together in unison, we can carry our message across."

Hagihara urged all concerned persons to write to their congressional representatives and to the president urging them to vote for redress for the Latin American Nikkei who were unjustly treated during the war.