

16th Congress of International Association of Democratic Lawyers

Report on Okinawa Issues

---- The Islands of Okinawa under U.S. Forces Realignment Plan and Residents' Struggle for Removal of Bases —

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Preface

Recently in Japan there have been attempts to revise Article 9 of the Constitution, which renounces war, and existing laws have been stretched to allow the Self Defense Force to be dispatched to Iraq. These are part of a movement attempting to make Japan into a country in which war is possible as an option. I will leave these issues to another Japanese participant to report at this congress, and report on the 'U.S. forces realignment programs' in Japan, focusing on its planned consolidation and perpetuation of U.S. bases in Okinawa, and residents' struggle against the scheme.

1. U.S. helicopter crash accident on a university campus

(1) Outline of the accident

Okinawa International University is located in Ginowan City in the middle of Okinawa. From the top of the main campus building, there is a full view of the U.S. Marine Futenma Air Station. The city's urban area sprawls around the base.

Around 2:18 p.m. on August 13, 2004, a U.S. Marine 'Sea Stallion' helicopter (CH-53D) crashed in the campus.

When the helicopter lost altitude, one of its six main rotor blades smashed against the rooftop of the university office building, broke from the helicopter and was thrown to a street a few hundred meters away. The other five blades one after

another hit buildings, and the helicopter crashed and burst into flames, scattering heavy oil. The black smoke billowed up as high as 10 meters.

Debris (propeller fragments mostly) fell 20 meters away from the scene, damaging the sign of a nearby condominium. an iron gear-like part, 40 cm in diameter smashed onto the rooftop of a one-story building.

The crash damage ranged from the campus to the neighboring housing area, but fortunately it hurt no citizens. It was really a miracle.

(2) U.S. action at the accident site

Immediately after the crash, U.S. personnel and local firefighters rushed to the site and saved the injured crew. Before the rescue, several explosions occurred, and the fuselage burned with huge smoke, igniting nearby trees. Around 3:08 p.m., the fire was extinguished by the desperate efforts of the firefighters.

Around 3:30 p.m., U.S. marines made the crash site off-limits by stretching a yellow tape. The U.S. forces forbade the entry of university staff, students, private citizens, news reporters, and even the local firemen. Because of this action, the fire squad could not make the legally required investigation into the cause of the accident.

In addition, the local police were ordered by the U.S. forces to cordon off the area, but their on-the-spot investigation was refused.

Even after the fire was extinguished and the danger was past, the U.S. forces continued to refuse to allow police or fire department investigations, and kept the area around the accident site closed off. Their outrageous action amounted to an occupation or seizure of the site.

Their illegal occupation lasted seven days. During this time they removed the

fuselage, scattered parts, and other debris from the crash site and the surrounding areas. They also carried away the damaged trees, soil and all. Even scorched and broken concrete wall blocks from the campus building were taken away.

Those trees, the soil, and the concrete blocks belonged to university authorities. Why did the U.S. forces carry them away? Their intention appears to have been to conceal the cause of the crash, and destroy evidence, and to evade the accusation of destruction of private property or other offences. They may even have been trying to hide the possibility that the soil, the trees and concrete blocks had been contaminated with radioactivity or dangerous chemicals.

It is suspected that the helicopter was carrying depleted uranium shells. A safety device in the main rotor contains radioactive strontium 90, and its leakage is greatly suspected. But the U. S. forces removed all the evidence of leakage.

(3) Concealing and distorting the Japan-U.S. Status of U.S. Forces Agreement (SOFA)

Article 17 of the SOFA includes an agreement by the Japan-U.S. Joint Committee regarding "The Japan-U.S. Accord concerning dealing with accident site of U.S. military aircraft (agreed in 1960)."

However, the Japanese government purposely mistranslated the phrase in the accord "without prior authority" into a phrase which, when re-translated into English, becomes "when they have no time to get prior authority" as shown below.

In those instances where the United States military aircraft crash or are forced to land on public or private property outside facilities and areas in use by

the United States Armed Forces, appropriate representatives of the United States Armed Forces shall be permitted to enter private or public property without prior authority (→when they have no time to get prior authority) to perform necessary rescue services and/or secure United States property, provided that every effort shall be made to avoid unnecessary damage to such private and public property. Japanese public authorities will take necessary measures within their capabilities to secure the property and prevent danger until the arrival of United States authorities. The Japanese and United States authorities shall exercise necessary joint control to restrict unauthorized personnel from the immediate vicinity of the accident scene.

The underlined part is the actual expression officially agreed between both governments.

As regards the crash accident, Okinawa Prefectural Police Headquarters obtained a warrant to investigate the crash site, and asked the Military Police of the Marine Corps to agree to their investigation, because U.S. consent is required for any such investigation. But the Military Police refused. The Military Police apparently referred to the SOFA agreement as their reason for refusal.

The U.S. forces, 'without prior authority' based on the above accord, arbitrarily closed the campus, the streets, and private areas affected by the crash.

This case illustrates inequalities written into the SOFA accords. What is worse, the Japanese government agreed to conditions in the SOFA which favor

the U.S., and published a distorted translation making it appear equal for both sides.

Article 17 of the SOFA states in addition that Japan is forbidden to detain a member of the U.S. Armed Forces when accused pending prosecution, when he or she commits a crime. This provision is completely different from that of the Bonn agreement between another country containing the U.S. Military, Germany, (a NATO member) and the U.S.

The Japanese, in particular residents of Okinawa, demand that these unequal provisions be drastically amended.

2. Barbarous act ---- construction of on-sea military base

(1) Special Action Committee on Okinawa (SACO) agreement in December 1996

All residents in Okinawa were enraged at the sexual crimes committed by three U.S. marines against a girl, which occurred in September 1995. Every municipal assembly in Okinawa adopted a resolution of protest, and on October 21 of the same year, a mass rally protesting the crime was attended by about 85,000 residents. In a residents' referendum held on September 8, 1996, residents voted for reduction of U.S. bases, and they made representations to both governments about this issue.

In response, both governments set up the Special Action Committee on Okinawa (SACO), and submitted a final report on the problem in December 1996.

The final report proposed a return of 12 U.S. bases to Japan, but the proposal virtually imposed only one option to the existing state, a relocation of the 12 bases within Okinawa, in return for increased government subsidy. The

centerpiece of the proposal is the construction of a huge and powerful sea base, the first ever in the world, in the sea off Nago City, in the northern part of the island.

(2) On-sea base which would exterminate dugongs

① Nago citizens rose against the plan as soon as the SACO accords were revealed.

On December 21, 1997, a municipal plebiscite on whether residents should accept the new base plan was held in the city. In an 82.4 % turnout, a majority of the voters (53.83 %) chose "No to a new base". It was a historic victory for the citizens.

② Cabinet gave the green light

Despite the citizen's rejection of the proposed base, the Japanese government in December 1999 decided at a cabinet meeting to approve construction of the base in Nago. Nago Mayor Tateo Kishimoto as well as Okinawa Prefectural Governor Keiichi Inamine accepted the cabinet decision. Thus the Japanese and U.S. governments, the Okinawan governor and the local mayor imposed their plan on Okinawa residents.

But Nago citizens including inhabitants of Henoko, a seaside area near the planned base, continued a dauntless struggle, which has entered a new phase.

③ Paradise sea and on-sea base

U.S. Camp Schwabe lies north of the planned on-sea base. The marines stationed there were sent to war and fought in Falluja, Iraq. The camp is to continue to exist and is planned to be closely linked with the planned base.

Along the sea area which includes Henoko lies a coral reef and a Pacific

lagoon. Terns nest there in early summer. The bountiful sea used to be a "pasture and field", a source of important food for the residents.

In the lagoon lies a field of rare seaweeds including turtle grass that dugongs, an internationally protected animal, use as a food source.

Groves in northern Okinawa are a treasury of rare creatures, being integral with marshes where subtropical corals and mangroves grow. Those rich ecologies are Japanese priceless treasures, and we Japanese have an international responsibility for protecting them.

In a tent put up on the beach are seen a lot of elderly men and women who adamantly struggling against constructing the on-sea base. Lively young people stage a sit-in, row a canoe out, and climb a scaffold in the sea in order to block a boring survey by defense facilities officials.

During breaks of their struggle, those old women talk to young members :

"Far beyond the sea of Okinawa lies a paradise. Since old times the gods of the paradise have provided rich products and happiness with villagers. During peaceful times free of war, islanders happily lived with bountiful mountain and marine products as well as field crops. During the ground battle in Okinawa 60 years ago, we could survive hardships thanks to the bountiful sea. How ridiculous it is to construct a human-killing base by ruining the sea! We must defend the sea at the risk of our lives!"

I often visit the tent and listen to the elderly. I always keep their stories in mind.

④ Devilish base

What is the on-sea base like? According to the government plan, it is 2,600 meters long, 730 meters wide, and covers an area of about 1.9 million square

meters. The scale is large enough to contain 15 Shuri Castles (Okinawa's biggest castle). The base is strong enough for C-17 Globemaster transport planes and V-22 Osprey vertical takeoff and landing aircraft. Osprey can fly twice as fast as helicopters. A Department of Defense report says, "Osprey's cruising distance, speed, loading capacity enable marines and supplies to move faster, escalating mobility of the marines drastically."

This makes it clear that the construction of the on-sea base will only serve to strengthen functions of U.S. bases in Okinawa.

Robert Hamilton, former company commander of Okinawa Marine Corps (1986-1988), said as follows:

"We cannot describe functions of Futenma Air Station in a general and superficial way. An on-sea base replacing Futenma base should be equipped with hangars for all aircraft to prevent damage from salt water. Storage to keep many parts and devices should be built for helicopters to take action. Besides, facilities for medical services, fire-extinguishing, and rescue activities are necessary. In short, the on-sea heliport will be as large as Kansai International Airport." (Refer to December 3 & 10 of 1997 issues of 'Ryukyu Weekly News')

The on-sea heliport might be called a "devilish base," which would serve to kill people in Iraq or other countries, and get rid of dugongs cherished by people all over the world. The construction of such a hellish base is the work of a devil which will go counter to the creator of the world..

3. U.S. forces realignment and Okinawa

(1) Substance of U.S. forces realignment

On February 19, 2005, Japan-U.S. Security Consultative Committee had a

meeting with Japan-U.S. Foreign and Defense secretaries attending. The opening paragraph of its joint communiqué says, "We recognize that Japan-U.S. alliance ensures security and prosperity of both countries, and will continue to play vital roles in escalating peace and stability in this region and the rest of the world, and reaffirm the need to increase cooperative relationships." It also specified 'intensifying Japan-U.S. cooperation in security and defense' as their 'common strategic goals.' In regard to Okinawa, it states, "Both sides emphasize that a steady implementation of the SACO final report is essential to a stable presence of U.S. forces in Japan." It suggests that U.S. forces will review its deployment with a view to enabling Japan and U. S. forces to conduct a concerted military action on a global scale. The substance of "U.S. forces realignment," as mentioned in the communiqué, is aimed at strengthening and perpetuating its bases in Okinawa in preparation for a new military rule.

(2) U.S. forces realignment and Okinawa

With regard to construction of the sea-base off Henoko in Nago City, a rumor is circulating that the U.S. may review the original plan or look for an alternate site (e.g. in U.S. Kadena Air Base, Shimojishima Island, U.S. Iwakuni Air Station) instead of Henoko. It is expected that both governments will work out a new measure in order to maintain the Japan-U.S. security setup, but their basic stance for adhering to the SACO line --- maintenance and relocation of its bases in Okinawa --- remain unchanged. This is clear from the fact that the defense facilities agency has not given up a boring survey for an on-sea base despite residents' fierce protest movement on the seaside.

(3) Consolidation of Self Defense Forces (SDF) in Okinawa

After the enactment of the special measures law on Iraq, units from across the country have been dispatched to Iraq. SDF Naha base plays a role as the center for transport of supplies and personnel. In January 2005, in the name of relief for tsunami victims in Sumatra, the SDF did a pilot integrated operation of land, maritime, and air forces. A transport plane carrying personnel was sent to Indonesia via Komaki Base in central Japan. In the past SDF overseas dispatches centered in Okinawa, and Okinawa has become part of several strategies aiming at China. Japanese and U.S. governments may attempt to have U.S. forces deployed in SDF bases and make a joint use of facilities.

Consolidation plans include proposals to replace the U.S. Marine Corps with a SDF unit at Futenma base. The Marine Corps, according to this proposal, would be allowed joint use of the facility in the future; an SDF unit would be deployed in Shimojishima Island, with a U.S. unit attached. But Okinawa residents already predict such a plot, and their struggles to not allow such an evil plot have now begun. One example is that residents of Irabu Town in Okinawa overturned its town assembly decision seeking SDF unit deployment on Shimojishima Island.

On March 16, Irabu Town Assembly adopted a “resolution to get SDF unit deployed” on the pilot training airfield of Shimojishima Island with a majority of 9-8 vote. The government and defense agency urged assemblymen to vote for the plan behind the scenes. Town people immediately rose against the decision.

On March 24, some town people pressed the pro-SDF assemblymen to have a one-hour talk. At the talk, the members said, “We will hold a town meeting this evening. If you muster a majority of town people, we will retract the assembly

resolution.” The talk ended a few minutes before 3 o’clock in the afternoon. From three to six o’clock, young people, construction workers, unionists, and town office employees who attended the talk desperately called on every resident to participate in the town meeting, using telephones, loudspeakers, and signature books.

At six o’clock, as many as 3,500 people, more than the majority of town’s population of 6,000, gathered at the site of the meeting. The residents grilled the assemblymen, asking, “will U.S. forces possibly come over next if the SDF unit comes to the island?” and “the SDF will be forced to cooperate in the U.S.-led war in Iraq in the name of U.S. forces realignment plan. Is that correct?” The assemblymen finally got stuck on the stage. Thus, the resolution was unanimously retracted, there, that evening.

4. Okinawa residents’ common and urgent tasks

(1) Ginowan citizens’ rally protesting against helicopter crash accident

On September 12, 2004, a Ginowan citizens’ rally in protest against the U.S. helicopter crash accident was held on the grounds of Okinawa International University. The rally organizers had a goal of having 10,000 people attending. But over 30,000 citizens, far more than their goal, participated under the scorching sun.

Many people from other cities in Okinawa and prefectures from the main islands of Japan took part. The rally, full of feverish excitement in protest, adopted a six-item demand, including “Remove Futenma Air Station immediately!” “Reconsider base relocation plan to Henoko!” and “Make drastic review of SOFA.” The item “Reconsider base relocation plan to Henoko” was

epochal since it symbolized solidarity between Ginowan and Nago citizens.

(2) Futenma base encircling movement and May 15 residents rally

On May 15, 2005, the year marking 33rd anniversary of the return to Japan of Okinawa's administrative rights, a "human chain" event was staged, encircling Futenma Air Station. This type of event had been conducted three times: in 1995, 1998 and 2004. But the May 15 action was attended by 23,850 residents, the largest ever. It was not a "forced" participation, but featured voluntary participation of every citizen.

On the same day at 5:30 p.m., the human chain action was followed by "Okinawa residents rally demanding early removal of the Futenma air base and opposing base relocation within the island" at Ginowan Seaside Park. As many as 7,500 residents overflowed the amphitheatre of the park.

The rally unanimously adopted a five-item demand: 1. Close and remove Futenma base, 2. Give up plans to relocate Futenma base to Henoko, Kadena Base, Iejima Auxiliary Airport, and Shimojishima Island, 3. Drastically revise SOFA, 4. Guarantee employment of Japanese employees hired by U.S. bases, 5. Make citizen-oriented use of vacant land returned by U.S. forces, compensate landowners for damage, and make environmental cleanup of the returned sites the government's responsibility.

As regards the SOFA, the October 21 rally of 1995 adopted "Drastically Review SOFA," but it was changed into "Drastically Revise SOFA" at the May 15 rally of 2005. The expression "Reconsider base relocation to Henoko" adopted at the September 12 rally of 2004 was changed into "Retract plans of relocating Futenma base to Henoko or any other U.S. bases within Okinawa" at

the May 15 rally of 2005.

Thus, these demands ---Futenma base closure, its relocation to Henoko or any other sites, drastic revision of SOFA--- have now become residents' common and urgent demands.

In Conclusion

In addition to issues mentioned above, there exist in Okinawa such problems as U.S. forces exercises forcibly conducted at an urban guerilla warfare training site built in the civic area within Camp Hansen, and relocation of the U.S. Naha military port to Urazoe City. In addition, problems continue to arise over noise pollution from U.S. aircraft at Kadena and Futenma bases and over injunctions restricting boring surveys at Henoko currently being fought in court.

The year 2005 marks the 60th anniversary of end of WWII, atomic bombings on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the Battle of Okinawa. For 27 years after WWII Okinawa was placed under the direct control of the U.S. forces, and during its government residents had their human rights infringed, and their dignity as a nation was terribly hurt. For 33 years after the reversion to Japan of Okinawa's administrative rights, things remain unchanged. We Okinawa residents share with Iraqi people suffering caused by the U.S.

We can never forgive the leaders of the Japanese Imperial Army who killed about 20 million Asian people, and drove 3.1 million Japanese into a miserable death. But I myself feel tormented by remorse for having allowed those war criminals to make horrible mistakes.

Wishing this congress to continue holding aloft the ideals of its founding in the future, I conclude my speech.

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In compiling this report, I was given precious materials and much advice by Teruo Onishi, representative of the association against heliport construction at Henoko, and former high schoolteacher, Yasuhiro Okubo, secretary of the Okinawa Peace Committee, and Shoji Niihara, international issues analyst. I hereby express my hearty gratitude to them for their help.