

Japan: The anti-US military base struggle in Okinawa

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Not many people outside Japan have even heard of the place called Okinawa, a semi-tropical archipelago of numerous islands with unique and invaluable biodiversity situated in the East China Sea – let alone have any knowledge of its modern history, dominated by the sequence of invasion, colonisation, war and militarisation.

Two peace activists from Okinawa, Aihara Sarasa and Kamoshita Yuichi, set out on a two-week European lecture tour in February 2016 to spread the word about the ongoing struggle by the Okinawan people against the construction of a new US military base adjacent to Camp Schwab in Henoko.

Invaded and colonised in the early seventeenth century during the Tokugawa Era, and annexed by the Meiji government in 1879, Okinawa and its people have suffered from serious discrimination and exploitation for centuries [1]. In particular, towards the end of the Asia-Pacific War, Okinawa became a battlefield, the only one, in Japan. There, Okinawans found themselves not only under attack by the US military; the Japanese military, which was supposed to protect the Okinawan people, in fact used them as a human shield and forced them to commit ‘honourable’ suicide before ‘they are captured by the US soldiers’. Within three to four months of the Battle of Okinawa, it is said that over 200,000 people were killed, of which over 120,000 were from Okinawa, including 94,000 civilians. One in five Okinawan people were killed [2].

After the war, Okinawa was occupied by the United States until 1972, and suffered various forms of violence, including land confiscation and recurring sexual violence. It still hosts 74% of US military bases and facilities (thirty-two) in Japan today [3], while Okinawa constitutes only 0.6% of Japan’s total area.

The strategic importance of Okinawa for military operations has meant that people in Okinawa have lived with the consequences of the presence of the military and the Japan-US Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA). These include the everyday violence of environmental damage, aeronautical noise, accidents caused by aircraft and military vehicles, together with sexual violence. As a result, anti-US military base movements and protests in Okinawa have been active for years. Feminist anti-military campaigns, such as those by Okinawa Women Act Against Military Violence, led by Takazato

Suzuyo, have highlighted the violation of human rights of people in Okinawa, particularly the suffering of women who fell victim to sexual violence. Residents in Higashison Takae Village in the northern part of the main island have organised a sit-in protest since 2007 to oppose the building of new helipads that prepare for the deployment of military aircraft Osprey [4]. However, these examples are only the beginning of the chronicle of Okinawan resistance.

Protest at Camp Schwab

Currently, the focal point of the struggle in Okinawa may be found in Henoko, which has taken the form of a big sit-in protest in front of Camp Schwab. This started in July 2014 in objection to the relocation of Futenma Air Station to Henoko. Futenma Air Station, situated in the southern part of the main island, is called 'the world's most dangerous military base'. It is constructed without an acceptable level of 'Clear Zones' (a primary school next to the base), and has constantly ignored legal standards set out in Japan's Civil Aeronautics Act [5].

Given this safety issue, and pressurised by a citizens' mass rally denouncing the chilling rape incident in September 1995 in which a 12-year-old schoolgirl was gang raped by three US servicemen, Japan and the US agreed Futenma should be returned to Okinawa in 1996, and Henoko was announced as the (originally planned to be much smaller) relocation site in November 1999. Residents of Henoko, who had already been protesting against this relocation plan, started their sit-in protest in April 2004. Furthermore, paddling canoes and divers also attempted to block seabed drilling investigations being carried out by the Naha Regional Defence Facilities Administration Bureau. With growing signs of more substantial construction work beginning in summer 2014, protesters began to gather in front of Camp Schwab to obstruct construction vehicles entering the Camp.

Anti-military base protests in Okinawa are no ordinary political struggle, and this is what Aihara and Kamoshita hope to convey through their talks in cities in the UK, Germany and Poland. Various anti-US military base groups and other groups and individuals in Okinawa have formed associations, such as Shimagurumi Kaigi (All Okinawa Council) and the Okinawa Peace Citizen's Network for collaboration. While Yamashiro Hiroji, the Chairman of the Okinawa Peace Movement Center, is often considered as the leading figure of the struggle, there is no fixed hierarchical structure in the movement, and decisions are made democratically amongst participating (core) groups as they take it in turn to lead the protest each day.

Protest activities are organised and led by people in Okinawa, as their lives are/have been most under threat. However, local activists urge people outside Okinawa to join them, and ask for their support. There is, indeed, a constant flow of visitors. Kamoshita maintains that about 30% of those who sit in front of the gates of Camp Schwab are those from other parts of Japan, and more people from outside participate in other protest activities. I, too, visited Henoko in June 2015, although very briefly, and met many people like myself.

What we all shared was the understanding that the struggle in Henoko is not simply an Okinawan question, but a vital issue for the whole of Japanese society. Many visitors stay for a prolonged period, become regular visitors or even completely relocate to Okinawa, as Aihara and Kamoshita did a few years ago.

Remembering the Battle of Okinawa

Although diverse individuals are involved in the protest, at the centre of the struggle are people of older generations, who retain horrifying memories of the Battle of Okinawa (and their children and families who were brought up listening to them.) They participate in sit-ins and other activities with a strong conviction that the tragedy of war should not be repeated and that no construction of military bases, the instrument of war and killing, should be allowed. This message permeates the Henoko anti-base movement. Their goal is to stop the construction (and eventually secure the withdrawal of all military bases from Okinawa) to make the world a more peaceful place to live in.



US bases on Okinawa.

Okinawan activists, it follows, do not see the police, private security guards and the US military personnel as their enemies, but rather treat them as individual human beings by greeting and speaking to them. This is manifested in their fundamental principle of non-violence, though the protest can still be direct and physical. Participants of sit-ins link arms with each other so that they are not easily removed by the police. However, they are also instructed not to put up a fight when they are being taken away. Therefore, while determined and serious, they rarely show physical aggression or hatred towards the police who are removing them [6].

Music and dancing, often traditional, is regularly used to uplift the spirits of protesters. They are very creative; recently they began to pile up concrete blocks to obstruct the gate, so that the police had to clear them in addition to removing the people sitting in for construction vehicles to be able to enter the Camp. This resistance, accompanied by unbroken smiles and heartening songs, even when the situation is serious, is the very heart of the struggle in Henoko and beyond, and this is what makes many people outside Okinawa keen to join the protest. Aihara says that this is why she moved to Okinawa, and she still feels that she receives and learns more from Okinawan people than she could ever offer them in return

Enemy images

Of course, the movements are not all perfect. People all over from Okinawa (and beyond) come to Henoko and participate in the struggle, but those who take part in direct action are still in the minority, considering the public opinion polls show that 80% of Okinawan people are opposed to the new US military base in Henoko. The diversity of people and groups involved means that tensions between different individuals and groups can arise. When I shared my uneasy experience of hearing some rather xenophobic chanting while I was there, Aihara told me that the values of different generations and nationalities can clash in the struggle. However, at the same time, she believes, this can be solved by deepening communication between different groups and individuals as the movement is open to change and wishes to be more inclusive. Indeed, when retired US soldiers recently visited Henoko and joined the protest, they requested that no anti-American chants be used, and this was respected, reiterated and transmitted to all the participants by the leader of the day.

Okinawan people have also tried other means to object to the relocation plan. One Okinawa prefectural referendum and a Nago city local referendum in the 1990s showed that the majority of people support reducing the presence of the US military in Okinawa and object to a new military base in Henoko. All-Okinawa mass rallies have been organised and attended by thousands of people

who have elected anti-relocation candidates to the House of Representatives in all four seats in Okinawa. Inamine Susumu elected the Nago City Mayor and Onaga Takashi, the Governor of Okinawa, strongly contest the relocation plan.

In October 2015, Onaga revoked the construction permit which had been approved by his predecessor (and the Japanese government challenged this by filing a lawsuit against him in November). However, as nothing has been successful in halting the construction so far, Okinawan people have employed the direct action of sit-ins in front of the Camp gates and protests by canoe at sea.

This exposes them to various dangers; while their actions are non-violent, in exchanges with the police, coast guards and other security guards, many protesters have suffered injuries, some serious, and there is a fear of the Japanese government filing a Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation (SLAPP) as it did with the residents of Higashison Takae in 2008.

International support

To open a new avenue of protest, local activists have been attempting to influence international communities, as they believe if more people know about the situation in Henoko, there might be stronger international pressure on the Japanese government which would be difficult to ignore. These days, not a small number of international visitors come to Henoko and provide transnational supports which is vital to the struggle. Onaga as well as representatives of Shimagurumi Kaigi visited the US to request that the US Government review the plan, while they strengthened US citizens' support.

As Kamoshita, who is a Buddhist monk, says, for the world to be freed from the chain of violence in which we are all trapped, the struggle of non-violence is crucial, and in that sense, Okinawan people and their effort represents a hope for the future of the whole world and its peace.

Maki Kimura

P.S.

* "The anti-US military base struggle in Okinawa, Japan". Open Democracy. 13 February 2016: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/maki-kimura/anti-us-military-base-struggle-in-okinawa-japan?utm>

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Footnotes

[1] See, available on ESSF (article 37183), [Okinawa \(Japan\) - Need for solidarity: controversial US army base sparks outrage among local population](#).

[2] <http://www.peace-museum.pref.okinawa.jp/heiwagakusyu/kyozai/qa/q2.html>

[3] <http://www.city.nago.okinawa.jp/DAT/LIB/WEB/1/Page8and9.pdf>

[4] <http://nohelipadtakae.org/files/VOT-english2013Oct.pdf>

[5] <http://www.pref.okinawa.lg.jp/site/chijiko/chian/futenma/risk.html>

[6] <http://vcnv.org/2016/01/14/video-okinawa-peace-protests-october-2015/>