

The Okinawan Anti-base Movement Regains Momentum —New U.S. Base Project Off Henoko Beach Met with Effective Non-Violent Resistance on the Sea

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After several years of doldrums, the anti-base movement in Okinawa regained its momentum in mid-2004, winning the hearts and minds of many Okinawa people and proving its great power of resilience. In Okinawa island, dominated by an extremely heavy presence of U.S. bases, the anti-base struggle now competently wrestles with the Japanese and U.S. governments (and also the Okinawa Prefectural government) on base issues. The struggle tackles four major issues.

The first is about the Futenma Air Station of U.S. Marine Corps, which is located in the midst of Ginowan City in the central part of Okinawa Island. There, citizens' long-voiced demand for removal of the base has intensified since a U.S. military helicopter belonging to that base crashed on a local university campus in August 2004. This incident not only aroused fierce protests by citizens but also exposed a series of grave issues embedded in the regime of U.S. military domination.

The second and the hottest issue is the confrontation over the construction of a new U.S. base off Henoko beach in Nago city in the northern part of Okinawa. People have launched vigils, a sit-down strike, and non-violent actions against the Japanese government's attempt to carry out drilling surveys at the bottom of the sea as an initial step to build the new offshore air base. As more and more people have come to support the immediate return of Futenma Airbase after the helicopter crash, the Naha Defense Facilities Administration Bureau (NDFAB), the local arm of the central government, made up its mind to accelerate the construction of the new Henoko base. The logic was that the Futenma base could be closed only in exchange for the new base. Since April 19 when local residents and supporters frustrated the NDFAB's first attempt to start drilling operation, the number of people who came to the sit-in tent and joined the protest has increased, bringing the battle to a stalemate.

The third issue is the surfacing of the U.S. plan to use a civil airline airport in Shimoji Island belonging to the Miyako Islands, located way south of Okinawa main island. The governments and citizens of the six cities and all towns in the Miyako region have organized to prevent the U.S. military from using the civil airport as a relay point for its operations to the south.

The fourth issue entails the construction of a new training facility for urban warfare inside the U.S.

Marine Corps' Camp Hansen, which sits next to Camp Schwab. Residents of the nearby Igei Ward in Kin Town adjacent to the camp launched protest sit-down in front of the gate to Camp Hansen. The sit-down demonstration held every morning except Saturdays and Sundays has been continued for seven months. Now the circle of people who support their protest is beginning to grow.

Of all these interlinked actions having developed since the middle of 2004, the most intense and serious is being taken in Henoko where people confront the NDFAB forces by courageous nonviolent direct action.

Fierce Struggle Continues in Henoko

"This is awesome. Japanese and U.S. military forces and people's forces are all there, all three jumbled up," said Makishi Yoshikazu, an architect, who was watching down on the scene from a small hill through binoculars. It was November 16, 2004 and the beginning of a long sea battle of non-violence which carried into 2005.

A little after 1:00 p.m. that day, an NDFAB work barge, escorted by "guard ships," appeared off the fishing port of Henoko, which is located on the east coast of Nago City on Okinawa Island. The vessel carried a big crane and huge equipment to make platforms (which are called "fixed-buoy towers") rooted in the 40-meter-deep sea bottom for bottom boring operations. Four large transport helicopters of the U.S. Marine Corps were roaring in the sky. Meanwhile, local residents and supporters boarded three small ships and sailed toward the NDFAB vessel. After the three ships, 22 canoes rowed forward led by a boat. Media companies' two helicopters also joined the scene.

The U.S. military were just conducting their usual training though. The transport helicopters flew from the west and dropped soldiers down in Camp Schwab with a rope. Then they flew away to the west and brought back another batch of soldiers. It was a training exercise for the dispatch of marines into enemy land. Makishi's impression notwithstanding, "Japanese military forces" were not there, strictly speaking. It was not Self-Defense Force soldiers but private contractors that represented the Japanese government.

The Japanese government is planning to landfill the sea off Henoko and construct an airbase with a full runway, 2,500 meters long and 60 meters wide. The government also wants to connect the airport and the shore with a bridge. As a preparatory step toward full construction work, 63 points at the sea bottom inside and outside of the coral reefs will be drilled, and the geological condition of the area will be investigated to decide how bank protection works should be conducted. The crane vessel was owned by a private company under contract with the Defense Facilities Administration Bureau (DFAB) of the central government. All the actual work will be done by private companies' employees. They are to strike huge piles into the 40 meter deep outer ocean bottoms, lower spud berths to 25-40 meter-deep bottoms, and build pipe-assembled scaffolds in 4-24 meter-shallow waters inside coral reefs. They are to dive and drill.

The so-labeled "guard ships" are 3-tonners owned by Henoko fishermen temporarily employed by the NDFAB to keep the protesters off the platform sites. Small ships carrying workers and divers are also owned by Henoko fishermen. They were variously remunerated for their services.

On the other hand, the anti-base activists' ships were smaller than the guard ships, weighing two tons or so. By the side of the 500-ton crane vessel they looked like fallen leaves drifting on the surface of the sea. But that day two activists jumped into the sea from the small ships and pushed the crane vessel 100 meters back. The colorful canoes—red, yellow, orange, green, rose color ones—were much, much smaller than the ships. The canoes sailing after the boat looked like a group

of ducklings swimming in a line. They could not gain an offing because waves were too strong there. Therefore they sailed to a small island inside the shallow water surrounded by coral reefs and waited for the crane vessel to get close to them. They were like ants challenging an elephant, an image of tiny Okinawa confronting the giant governments of Japan and the U.S.

The ants did a tremendous job. Since the preliminary investigation started on September 9, they have continued to conduct protest actions riding on canoes and small ships on all week days. After the crane vessel made its way into the bay on November 16, bounding off protest boats, activists braved direct physical action to stop platform construction work. Made up of pipes, the platforms looked like jungle gyms. Activists jumped onto them, held fast to pipes, their bodies above or under the sea, to thwart the work. After four platforms were completed despite resistance, activists mounted atop the platforms and occupied their top floor to bar further construction. They kept taking nonviolent direct action of this type every day. They were also monitoring all processes of the government operation. When a spud ship's leg touched and damaged coral reef, activists dived and video-recorded the damage to prove the case. This footage was effectively used to appeal to public opinion and nullified the government's claim that the drilling was not destroying coral reef. Some construction workers acted rough against the pipe-holding activists, trying to shove them down into the seas. Tossed down by them, two activists fell from up high and were injured.

Gradually these protesters' life-risking action began to move fishermen in the neighboring villages. By the middle of December, they began to join the anti-base action on the sea. With this reinforcement, the number of protest ships tripled. Everyday 12 to 14 ships began to surround the platforms so the construction workers could not get even close there. The supporting ships came from fishermen's associations of neighboring fishing communities along the coastline extending north and south of Henoko, such as Ishikawa, Kin, Higashi, and Kunigami. Many civil groups such as the Okinawa Peace Committee, a poets' group, and the Peace Boat of mainland Japan raised funds to charter yet more ships. A prominent novelist, Haitani Kenjiro, offered his private ship for protest actions. Faced by the protesters' actions, the construction work was greatly delayed. Worse still for the government, one typhoon after another attacked Okinawa causing further delays in the work. Although the NDFAB's initial plan was to start drilling the sea bottom in November, they could not drill even one spot by the end of 2004.

On December 21, the seventh anniversary of the Nago City's referendum in which 53 percent of its residents had voted against the construction of the new base, a vigorous anti-base demonstration was carried out on the sea. The flotilla of 23 ships of various sizes with a total of 120 activists aboard sailed around the four platforms atop which 200 occupying activists, who had been protesting on canoes for three months, were cheering. Three-ton class fishing boats joined the peace fleet, flying large colorful flags usually hoisted to celebrate a good fish catch of the day. About 200 supporters, joined by musicians, were there on the distant shore, cheering the demonstrators at sea.

Sailing across the 250 ha sea areas earmarked for reclamation, we felt how vast it was. It took us more than two hours for the demonstrators' ships to sail round the area. The beautiful color gradation of the sea—emerald green, light blue, and dark blue—impressed even U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld who recently flew over it. We deeply felt that losing this sea would be a great loss to the world.

Crash of a U.S. Military Helicopter: Fear Turns into Reality

Earlier, on August 13, a large transport helicopter (CH4D) of the U.S. Marine Corps that took off from Futenma Air Station crashed and burned on the campus of Okinawa International University,

located in the middle of the urban district of Ginowan City, in the central part of Okinawa Island. In fact, this incident prompted the NDFAB to hurry the preliminary investigation of the Henoko sea bottom for the new base.

The helicopter crashed with a loud noise and the campus building hit was filled with black smoke and flames. Parts of the propeller jumped into neighboring houses breaking windows and walls, and this accident panicked Ginowan citizens. Luckily no residents were injured. Later it was learned that the transport helicopter belonged to the Hawaii Marine Corps. It had stopped by Futenma Air Station on its way to Iraq. When the crash occurred, U.S. soldiers of Futenma Air Station almost instantaneously rushed to the scene as though they had jumped over barbed wire fences, and sealed off the campus from the Japanese. Ginowan City's fire fighters arrived earlier than the U.S. fire crew and put off the fire and sent injured pilots to the hospital. But after the arrival of the U.S. military unit, the campus turned into a veritable U.S. territory occupied by the U.S. military and placed outside of Japan's sovereignty.

The crash occurred while the university was in summer vacation. A small number of students and university administrative staff who happened to be inside were kicked out of the campus by American soldiers. The Okinawa International University President and the Ginowan City Mayor as well as Okinawan and Japanese government officials arrived and tried to enter the campus premise to examine the scene but they were refused access. Japanese riot police cooperated with U.S. soldiers and stopped angry people from going into the university campus. The U.S. military cut trees, collected the remains of the crashed helicopter, and even took away the soil on the spot of the crash without getting permission from the university. The operation took four days. The whole process done without Japan's involvement was claimed legitimate under the Japan-U.S. Status-of-Forces Agreement (SOFA).

Not only Ginowan citizens but also people in all parts of Okinawa were shocked by the helicopter crash. They were furious at the incident that they had long anticipated and felt humiliated by the arrogant behavior of the American military. The anger and concern spread fast throughout Okinawa.

The Ginowan municipal office and the municipal council immediately made a resolution against the U.S. military for its arrogant handling of the helicopter crash. They demanded of the Japanese and U.S. governments as well as the U.S. military: (1) immediate closure of the Futenma Air Station without the condition of its relocation to Henoko (review of the 1996 SACO decision[1]); (2) prohibition of flights of all kinds of military helicopters over urban districts; (3) amendment of the SOFA that undermined Japan's sovereignty. About 40 of the 52 municipal, township, and village councils in Okinawa Prefecture called emergency sessions in response to the Ginowan incident and adopted protest resolutions basically endorsing the Ginowan demands. Though some fell short of directly opposing the relocation of Futenma Base to Henoko and did not use the words "all kinds of U.S. military helicopters," most of these resolutions demanded that the flights of the same type of helicopter that crashed in Ginowan be prohibited and that the Futenma base be closed now irrespective of the construction of a substitute base at Henoko. In opinion polls conducted by two newspapers in Okinawa, the Okinawa Times and the Ryukyu Shimpo, 90 percent and 82 percent of the respondents, respectively, opposed the relocation of the base to Henoko.

Presidents of six universities in Okinawa took the unusual action of issuing a joint statement calling for the cessation of military helicopter flights. Various civil groups protested against the crash and took various actions demanding the closing of Futenma Air Station. Local media repeatedly and prominently carried reports about the crash scene and stories of local residents who were terrified of the crash. Featuring the issue in all forms, they serialized critical contributions from prominent intellectuals. Media kicked off active public discussion. Many questions were raised in this context. Despite the presence of the Futenma Air Station in the midst of Ginowan city, which has been

repeatedly been cited as dangerous, why does it still exist? Why do people in Okinawa have to allow this unreasonable situation? People's discussion grew heated and calls for justice led to a major mobilization. On September 12, 30,000 people participated in the Ginowan Citizen's Rally. The number was three times more than the goal set by rally organizers. The rally was initially supposed to be held on September 5, but it was postponed due to a typhoon that hit Okinawa that day.

Calculating the best timing of the launching of the Henoko operation, the NDFAB earlier came to the judgment that the best time would be immediately after the Ginowan rally had given vent to public anger. Thus they chose September 9 as the date. But this stratagem backfired as the typhoon forced postponement of the rally beyond September 5 and people gathered on September 12 with their anger refueled by the scene of the Henoko operation.

Certainly, the situation in Okinawa is becoming similar to that of 1995, the year in which the rage of the people of Okinawa, triggered by the rape of a girl by U.S. soldiers, exploded against the U.S. bases and went to the length of shaking the Okinawa policy of the Japanese and U.S. governments to its foundation. It must be admitted, however, that the current expression of people's anger has not yet reached the 1995 level. This is largely because the various placating measures introduced by both governments have made their effects felt. The two governments are well aware that the anti-base movement in Okinawa could make the continued presence in Okinawa of U.S. forces difficult.

The influence of these measures resulted in people in Okinawa electing those politicians who would accept U.S. military bases in exchange for massive financial aid as the heads of the Prefecture as well as quite a few local cities and towns. The mayor of Nago City is one such politician. On the surface, it appeared as if the governmental policy over U.S. military bases had gained people's support following a democratic procedure. Under these circumstances, people in mainland Japan have mitigated their sense of guilt that "Japan has been victimizing Okinawa" and soothing themselves began to empathize less with Okinawan people's protest. In 1995, Okinawans' anger was derived from the fact that Okinawa was forced to accommodate 75 percent of U.S. military bases in Japan and pay a huge price for the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty. The financial aid to Okinawa worked to make mainland Japanese believe that Okinawa had been compensated with financial aid for the sacrifice.

In this political climate, Ginowan and Okinawan people's demands are completely ignored this time. Prime Minister Koizumi refused even to meet Ginowan City Mayor and Okinawa Governor Inamine who flew to Tokyo after the Ginowan incident to present their requests over the helicopter crash. Although the Commander in Chief of the U.S. Marine Corps apologized to Ginowan City Mayor, the U.S. forces resumed their take-off and landing training three days after the crash. On the tenth day, large helicopters including the same model that had crashed began flying over the Ginowan City urban district to carry soldiers onto the Iraq-bound amphibious assault ship Essex. In a press conference held at the Foreign Correspondents' Club of Japan, Commander in Chief of the U.S. military forces in Japan only admired the pilot of the crashed helicopter for his skill in averting more serious damage. The Commander in chief of U.S. military forces in Okinawa also celebrated his soldiers for rushing to the campus so speedily, engaging in fire fighting, and rescuing fellow soldiers. Mainland Japanese mass media treated the crash only as another small accident.

Getting United and Opposing the Military Use of Shimoji Island Airport

The U.S. military has started to pay attention to a civil airport located in Shimoji Island belonging to the Miyako Islands as a support air base for the deployment of U.S. troops in Southeast Asia. The Japanese Defense Agency also is planning to station fighter planes there to control waters near the

territorially disputed Diaoyu Islands (Senkaku Islands) and monitor the Taiwan Strait in its attempt to strengthen Japan's military presence in the south west. (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, however, is cautious about the plan for fear that it may aggravate Sino-Japanese relations).

The Miyako Islands are located about 300 kilometers to the south of Okinawa Island. The Yaeyama group of islands with Ishigaki Island as the main island, is 130 kilometers still further to the south from Miyako Island. Shimoji Island is part of this Yaeyama group. There are not U.S. military bases on any of these islands as in the war between Japan and the United States, the U.S. military did not land there, nor were ground battles fought there. Therefore nature is well-conserved on the islands. Compared with Okinawa Island in which both the shore and the sea have been destroyed by bases and "development," the southernmost chain of Ryukyu islands still maintains rich nature and unique traditional cultures in festivals, songs, and dances. This is one of the most popular tourist destinations for Japanese.

Shimoji Island Air Station was constructed in 1972 as a training station for pilots of private airline companies. It became an Okinawa Prefecture-owned airport in 1979. Its runway is 3000 meters long and 60 meters wide. It is one of the largest air strips in Asia. When the construction of the airport was proposed, Okinawa progressives were concerned about the potential military use of the airport. Yara Chobyō, then Okinawa Governor from the progressive camp, requested the Japanese government use the airport strictly for civil airline purposes in his memorandum to the central government (known as "the Yara Memorandum"). Transportation Minister at that time accepted the request.

Ignoring the memorandum, U.S. military planes recently began to make "emergency landings" at Shimoji Island Airport allegedly for "refueling on their way to and from joint military exercises with the Philippines." Every time such landings took place, local residents would lodge strong protests. Okinawa Governor Inamine, too, opposes the military use of the airport and has repeatedly requested the U.S. military refrain from landing military aircraft there. But the Japanese government again ignores such protests and requests on grounds of the SOFA under which the Japanese government could not say "no" to the landings.

On September 14 2004, it was reported that the United States asked the Japanese government to allow the use of Shimoji Island Airport for a joint military exercise with the Self Defense Forces. This gave rise to a massive opposition movement of the entire island communities of Miyako, including the local governments and people. On November 28, some 2000 people including mayors of six local governments, chairpersons of local assemblies, prominent educators, and members of citizen's organizations, women's groups, and labor unions got together in an "All-Miyako Rally for the Opposition of the Military Use of Shimoji Island." The mayor of Irabu Town (where the airport is located) and local high school students made appeals for using the airport only for peaceful purposes and for the sake of the wellness of the people of Shimoji Island.

The local people's appeals were not heard by the U.S. military. On December 8, medium-sized transport helicopters and large refuel aircraft from Futenma Air Station landed at Shimoji Island Airport for the purpose of sending humanitarian aid goods to typhoon victims in the Philippines. Ten days later, they landed at the airport on their way from the Philippines. In total, 12 helicopters and planes landed at the airport. Local people continued to protest against the landing of the U.S. military aircraft. They are angry at the fact that the U.S. military is trying to establish fait-accompli of use the airport under the guise of humanitarian aid, which is a difficult reason for Shimoji Island people to reject.

Seven-Month Protest against the Construction of an Anti-terrorist and Guerrilla Training Facility

Marine Corps' base Camp Hansen that occupies the mountainous part of Kin Town is next to Camp Schwab located in Henoko. Inside Camp Hansen, an urban combat training center is about to be opened. The center is separated with a fence from the urban district of the Igei district of Kin Town, and the closest distance between them is only 300 meters. The other side of the center is only 200 meters away from Okinawa Highway that runs through Okinawa Island from north to south. Local residents are furious because the center was initially planned to be built at Andersen Base in Guam, but the plan was changed because the original location in Guam was found to be too close to a commercial area. Over the past 16 years the Igei district community has suffered from damage from artillery shells shot into it, which have caused human casualties.

Before the construction of the urban combat training center began in May, 2004, residents of the Igei district started to hold a one-hour protest sit-in demonstration at the gate of the Camp Hansen every morning. They sent delegates to Tokyo and requested the Japanese government and the U.S. embassy to cancel the construction. The Kin Town council as well as the Okinawa Prefecture assembly passed a resolution for stopping the construction of the center. Okinawa Governor Inamine, whose slogan is cutting back U.S. military bases in Okinawa, visiting the Igei region in October, officially urged the U.S. military and the Japanese government to stop the construction of the center. Here, too, the stumbling block is the SOFA under which Japan is obligated to allow the U.S. military to exercise exclusive control of U.S. bases in Japan. The Japanese government can only ask the U.S. military to introduce "safety measures." Not paying attention to local residents' concerns, the U.S. military goes on building the center by cutting trees and exposing reddish soil underneath.

People in the Igei region did not give up and continued to protest even through the busy farming season. On December 11, the 200th day after they started their action, a large opposition rally was held in Igei district. Supporters from across Okinawa including national Diet representatives and Okinawa Prefecture assembly members participated. This struggle, looking isolated at the beginning, is now gaining support of broader segments of society.

U.S. military's High-Handed and Insolent Attitude

While local residents persistently continue the anti-base action, what strikes us is the high-handed attitude the U.S. military nowadays takes over the Okinawa issue. This is reminiscent of the U.S. arrogance during the occupation period that ended some 30 years ago. Especially since 9/11, their attitude has become worse; sometimes it appears that they want to provoke a reaction. It appears that the U.S. now feels free to make stronger demands to Japan urging deeper commitment to the U.S. war. Immediately after 9/11, Japan was told by U.S. assistant secretary of defense Richard Armitage to "show the flag" and Japan hurriedly sent its navy fleet to the Indian Ocean to supply fuel to U.S. warships operating in the Afghanistan waters. More recently, a high official of the Department of Defense explicitly urged Japan to amend its Constitution to permit full participation in a collective defense system with the U.S. The Japanese government takes these words as behests and acts accordingly, as is typical with Japan's support for the Bush war in Iraq. The way Okinawa is now treated certainly reflects the new resolve and nexus of the two governments.

The history of people's movement in Okinawa has so far followed this pattern: movement rises vigorously, gathers momentum, and gains the upper hand, but then is pivot-thrown by the Japanese government's artful stratagem, bumps into a wall, and gets isolated. Now is the time for the

Okinawa movement to regain momentum and never to lose it again. The current struggle in fact takes advantage of new factors that have emerged. The new support factors are global solidarity, the use of crucial information preemptively gathered, and the mobilization of wisdom and expertise of people who engage in various social movements.

As for the Henoko issue, pro-environmental groups around the world are now on the side of the anti-base movement. Shocked by the impending destruction of the Henoko environment, a habitat of rare marine mammal dugongs, they have raised their voice of opposition. On November 25, the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN) held its annual convention and passed a resolution for the protection of dugongs in the Henoko waters. The Okinawa Prefectural Environment Assessment Council advised Okinawa Prefecture to include the sea-bottom boring within the scope of legally required environmental assessment. The national and Okinawa Prefecture governments had been arguing that environment assessment procedures were not necessary for this part of the base construction work.

Because of the helicopter crash, the young generation in Okinawa, who had not seriously questioned the existence of U.S. military bases in Okinawa before, have come to recognize that war was not someone else's affair but their own. Youths in Okinawa together with those in mainland Japan have started to exchange their thoughts about military bases and war with young people of neighboring countries such as South Korea. They have begun to think about the U.S. military base issue and war far more seriously than before.

As I observe, a new move regarding the Okinawa base issue always occurs toward the end of the year. It did in 2004, too. What is the prospect for 2005? In 2004, the U.S. force reformation scheme worked somewhat favorably for Okinawa as it subjected the status quo of Okinawa bases to review and scrutiny and thereby created certain space for movement intervention. In 2005, the reorganization of U.S. forces will expose the people in the rest of Japan to the real face of the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty system as U.S. bases may be relocated into their neighborhoods. The year 2005 is the 60th anniversary of the end of World War II. People in Okinawa will send out their peace messages in various manners and on all available occasions. I really hope that people around the world will pay attention to this small island Okinawa in which a massive number of residents were victimized during the war, and people will keep struggling against the expansion of military bases that can victimize people all around the world.

Endnote

[1]: In 1996 the U.S. and Japanese governments created a special action committee on Okinawa (SACO) in order to placate the upsurge of Okinawa people's anti-base movement against U.S. military bases triggered by the rape of a 12-year old girl by U.S. soldiers in the previous year. The SACO produced an agreement in December 1996 that 11 U.S. bases in Okinawa be reduced or "returned" to Japan. The Futenma base, according to the agreement, was to be returned in exchange for the construction of a substitute base within five to seven years.

P.S.

* From Japanesia website. Translated by KAWAI Yuko.

* YUI Akiko was born in Shuri, Naha City in 1933. In 1951, came to Tokyo using a passport issued by the U.S. military authorities. In 1955, began working at the Tokyo office of the Okinawa Times, covering Tokyo. In 1990, moved back to Okinawa after 30 years to work in the head office. Reported on changes in Okinawa and women's activities. After working in Tokyo from 1983 to 1990, worked as a chief editor and editorialist from 1991 to 1992. In 1997, retired and became a free writer. From

1997 to 2002, acted as chair of the Unai Festival organizing committee. From 2003 to the present, has acted as joint representative of the Okinawa Network on the Hansen Disease Problem. Her works include Okinawan Women Today [Okinawa onnatachi ha ima] (co-authored), History of Women of Naha, "Flowers, footsteps of women" [Hana onna no ashiato], contemporary history, postwar history (co-authored), and other words on the contemporary history of Okinawans.