

Okinawa governor irate over V-shaped runway plan for Futenma replacement facility

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NAHA — Visiting Defense Minister Toshimi Kitazawa has told Okinawa Gov. Hirokazu Nakaima that the central government has decided to construct a V-shaped runway in the Henoko district of Nago as part of a replacement facility for U.S. Marine Corps Air Station Futenma, sparking fierce opposition from the governor.

Kitazawa met Nakaima at the Okinawa Prefectural Government on June 13, formally conveying the government's decision based on the bilateral agreement between Tokyo and Washington last May. Kitazawa told the governor that Tokyo will uphold the V-shaped runway plan at the upcoming Japan-U.S. Security Consultative Committee ("two plus two") meeting to be held in Washington on June 21.

"After weighing various factors such as noise pollution, the central government decided to uphold the V-shaped runway plan," Kitazawa said.

The defense minister also said it would be difficult to complete the relocation of the Futenma airbase by 2014. "Since there is a risk of Futenma being forced to host the airbase much longer, the government wants to have the (V-shaped runway) plan documented at the two-plus-two meeting after striking a bilateral accord so that the relocation plan will be implemented at the earliest possible date," Kitazawa said.

Gov. Nakaima, however, strongly opposed the central government's decision, reiterating his demand that the Futenma airbase in Ginowan be relocated outside Okinawa Prefecture.

"Even if Tokyo and Washington decide to proceed with the plan, it won't be implemented unless the government wins understanding from local residents and Okinawans. It is extremely regrettable," Nakaima said.

Regarding the U.S. Department of State's recent announcement that it will deploy MV-22 Osprey vertical takeoff and landing aircraft at the Futenma airstrip from late 2012, Kitazawa said, "We haven't received a formal notice, but things are apparently moving in that direction." "The move, however, was also met by stiff opposition from Nakaima." "We vividly remember the history of frequent accidents (involving the Osprey) in the course of its development and after it was put into practical use. As the representative of all Okinawa Prefecture residents, I cannot approve the plan," Nakaima said

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