

Okinawa (Japan) - Need for solidarity: controversial US army base sparks outrage among local population

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It is time activists across the globe extended solidarity to those protesting to prevent the construction of a new military base in Okinawa, who are haunted by their memories.

The history of Okinawa, a group of small islands located in the East China Sea, is not known to many. Before it was forcibly annexed by the Japanese government in 1879 through military force, the islands were governed by an independent kingdom (Ryukyu Kingdom) which enjoyed its strategic trade location and housed diverse religions and languages. As the vastly unique culture and religions which had existed since 1429 was halted through Japanese colonization, assimilation policies were imposed on the people of Okinawa, including a ban on using indigenous languages and practicing religious and other forms of cultural tradition.

Okinawa was ordered to serve important strategic purposes for the Japanese government during the Pacific War. In addition to approximately 80,000 soldiers from outside Okinawa, 25,000 adults and teenagers including boys and girls under 18 years old were recruited locally to protect the interests and ensure the safety of mainland Japan. Of the 188,136 people who were killed in the Battle of Okinawa, a quarter of the death toll was the local population. Inevitably, this left strong resentment among the locals and a strong desire for sustainable peace. The people of Okinawa no longer wanted to be sacrificed for Japanese or US military interests.

Currently, 74% of the entire US military presence is situated in Okinawa, even though Okinawa only comprises 0.6% of Japan's total land area. During the period following the Pacific war, Okinawa, which came under US control for 20 years until 1972, witnessed an escalation of human rights abuses. The land of the locals was confiscated to build military bases and facilities. Women and children were reportedly raped, and a disturbing number of locals were killed by US soldiers or in US aircraft crashes. The victims of grave human rights violations were hardly given any justice under the foreign administration, which escalated the locals' bitter feelings towards the US military bases.

Since 1972, despite demands from the local population for self-determination, Okinawa is by law Japanese territory, and the US continues to enjoy a strong military presence there through bilateral agreements with the central government. What is of grave concern is that, in order to protect US interests in East Asia, the Japanese government has agreed to extend this presence by establishing a new military base.

The people of Okinawa are furious. They have not forgotten about the kidnapping, rape and murder of a 13 year old girl in 1995 by three US soldiers. This has also triggered a strong opposition campaign against the Futenma Air Station, "the most dangerous air station in the world", located in the middle of a populated residential area including a university campus. Eventually, the Japanese

and US governments agreed to relocate the Futenma Air Station. Yet, their latest decision again outraged the people of Okinawa, since it plans to build a new military base in Okinawa, ignoring the people's will to decrease the heavy military presence.

Henoko, a suburb in northern Okinawa, was chosen to construct this highly controversial base. Its Oura bay hosts a diverse ecological system of dugongs' sea grass beds and corals. The proposed military base will be the largest US military base in East Asia and will have an adverse impact on the ecological balance of the island, while taking more land away from the locals. To stop the construction plan, environmental and peace activists and concerned citizens are staging protests on and off shore. The survey conducted by a local newspaper and TV corporation in May 2015 shows that 77.2% of respondents oppose the construction plan, while 83% demand relocation outside Okinawa.

In its annual international 2014 report, Amnesty International reports that "Japan continued to move away from international human rights standards." Coupled with the increasing US military presence, the right to freedom of expression and assembly in Okinawa is severely violated. On May 17 2015, thousands of protestors took to the streets carrying "Get out! Don't kill! Don't die", "Don't destroy nature" and "Get out Marines" posters while images of Japanese police dragging protestors exercising their most fundamental right to peaceful protest were circulated in the social media.

Freedom of expression is also constrained by the many slanderous statements of government officials addressing news outlets critical of the Japanese government's plan to build an additional military base. The Okinawa Times and Ryukyu Shimpo, two daily newspapers in Okinawa highly critical of the plan to establish an additional military base were targeted by lawmakers of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). On June 25, referring to the two newspapers, Naoki Hyakuta, a writer and former governor of NHK (Japan Broadcasting Corporation), said they "must be closed down by any available means" in a workshop of LDP lawmakers.

Although dominant capital is favouring the construction of the US military base, local politicians in Okinawa convey a different sentiment. In a speech delivered on June 23, the governor of Okinawa, Takeshi Onaga, said that he hoped that the Japanese government will cancel its plan to extend a US military presence in Okinawa because, "it is impossible to build a cornerstone of peace if freedom, equality, human rights and democracy are not guaranteed equally for all citizens."

Although the Japanese government holds the primary responsibility for ensuring an effective and democratic response to the legitimate demands of citizens of Okinawa, the international community bears responsibility too. It is time international human rights mechanisms, including the UN, take concrete action to end the decades of suffering imposed through military ambitions on Okinawa. It is time activists across the globe extended solidarity to those protesting to prevent the construction of a new military base in Okinawa and struggling for full control over their land and livelihood despite the Japanese government's hostile attitude towards any form of dissent.

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* "In Japan: controversial US army base sparks outrage among local population". Open Democracy. 3 August 2015:

<https://www.opendemocracy.net/taisuke-komatsu-semanur-karaman/in-japan-controversial-us-army-base-sparks-outrage-among-local-popul>

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