

Okinawa US Base: Okinawans protest base environment assessment

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Okinawa: Defense chief hopes to begin Futenma-related construction by year-end

TOKYO (Kyodo) — Japan's new defense minister, Naoki Tanaka, voiced hope Sunday that the government can begin construction work by the end of this year to relocate the U.S. Marine Corps' Futenma Air Station within Okinawa Prefecture after gaining consent from the local community.

"Whether we can begin the construction within this year has been a focus of the procedures for the time being but we cannot move the project forward without acceptance by the people of Okinawa," Tanaka told a program aired by public broadcaster NHK.

Tanaka is the first senior official of the Japanese government to mention a time frame for the start of construction work for project. Tanaka took his post in a Cabinet reshuffle Friday.

Tanaka also hinted that failure to start construction work within this year could force Japan and the United States to review a bilateral agreement on the base relocation project, saying, "If the plan doesn't proceed, the United States would be pressed to review it."

Tanaka also said he wants to meet with Okinawa Gov. Hirokazu Nakaima before this year's ordinary parliamentary session begins Jan. 24.

Tanaka said that as Futenma is "the most dangerous military base in the world, I want to seek a breakthrough soon" in closing the big gap with Okinawa over the relocation of the base, currently located in a densely populated area in Ginowan.

"Japan's politics will lose the world's confidence unless we deal with this matter properly," Tanaka said.

Kyodo Press, January 15, 2012

<http://mdn.mainichi.jp/mdnnews/national/archive/news/2012/01/15/20120115p2g00m0dm074000c.html>

Okinawa: Okinawans rap new defense chief's remarks on Futenma relocation

NAHA — Okinawans reacted critically to new Defense Minister Naoki Tanaka's remarks on Jan. 15 that the government hopes to start construction work by the end of this year to relocate the U.S. Marine Corps' Air Station Futenma to another location in Okinawa Prefecture.

His remarks "totally trample upon the sentiments of Okinawa and even cause fear," said Michio Sakima, 65, who opened the Sakima Art Museum in Ginowan in 1994 after being given back a plot of land that had been within Futenma base.

The new defense chief's remarks come as Okinawa Gov. Hirokazu Nakaima and many other Okinawan leaders and residents have urged the central government to move the Futenma base outside Okinawa.

Japan and the United States agreed in 1996 on the return of the land holding the U.S. airfield back to Japan, but repeated efforts to relocate the airfield to Nago's Henoko district have not materialized.

"The Okinawan people are totally opposed to it (the relocation scheme). The weak Democratic Party of Japan administration cannot start construction work," Sakima said.

Seiyu Yonaha, head of the Aragusuku district community, commented, "If he (Tanaka) knew the reality of Okinawa, he would never say 'the start of construction work within this year.' He just became defense minister, and I wonder how he can dare say such a thing before even coming to Okinawa."

Referring to Tanaka's statement that the United States may be forced to review the bilateral realignment deal with Japan if there is no progress in the matter, Yonaha, 63, said, "It shows how he pays attention only to the United States. If he's going to say such things, he should relocate the airfield to his constituency in Niigata."

Hideki Yoshikawa, head of the nonprofit organization Citizens' Network for Biological Diversity in Okinawa, which has waged a campaign to protect the environment in and around the Henoko district, was dismayed by Tanaka's remarks which he said show the new defense chief does not know Okinawa.

Yoshikawa, 47, read an environmental impact assessment that the central government sent to the Okinawa Prefectural Government as it has tried to gain consent by the governor for the construction of the relocation site in Nago.

"The assessment report is unscientific and the governor cannot permit reclamation," Yoshikawa said. He added that lawsuits to protect the environment are ongoing and Tanaka would not be able to say construction work will start if he came to Okinawa and understood the sentiments of Okinawan people and the local reality.

Hiroji Yamashiro, director of the administrative office of Okinawa Heiwa Undo Center, a citizens' group against relocation of the Futenma base within Okinawa, said, "The people of Okinawa are very angry at the central government. As the new defense minister, (Tanaka) should make efforts to gain the people's understanding at each step."

Yamashiro is skeptical about Tanaka's tenure as defense chief in light of his remarks on the start of construction work within this year, saying Tanaka is following the will of bureaucrats and trying to

push his foregone conclusions on the Futenma issue.

Mainichi Shimbun, January 16, 2012

<http://mdn.mainichi.jp/mdnnews/national/archive/news/2012/01/16/20120116p2a00m0na013000c.html>

Okinawa: Nago mayor to visit U.S. to ask for moving Futenma out of Okinawa

NAHA, Japan (Kyodo) — The mayor of Nago, Okinawa Prefecture, to which the Japanese government is seeking to relocate the U.S. Marine Corps' Futenma Air Station, said Monday he will visit the United States from Feb. 6 to 11 to urge Washington to move the base outside the prefecture.

"We cannot overlook the forcible relocation of the base to Henoko in Nago. Speaking to the Japanese government takes us nowhere so I want to tell the United States about the current situation," Mayor Susumu Inamine told reporters.

Okinawa residents, who have been calling for easing the concentration of U.S. military facilities in the prefecture, have strongly opposed the plan to relocate the Futenma Air Station from the prefecture's Ginowan to a less populated area in Nago's Henoko district.

The people of Okinawa have been urging relocation of the key U.S. base outside the prefecture, but the central government intends to implement a Japan-U.S. agreement to move the base within the prefecture.

Kyodo Press, January 17, 2012

<http://mdn.mainichi.jp/mdnnews/national/archive/news/2012/01/17/20120117p2g00m0dm029000c.html>

2nd damages suit over Futenma noise pollution to be filed

NAHA, Japan (Kyodo) — More than 3,000 people living near the U.S. Marine Corps' Futenma Air Station in Ginowan, Okinawa Prefecture, will file a suit against the central government around March seeking to halt flights at the base and damages over deterioration of health due to aircraft noise, their representative said Tuesday.

The suit will follow a similar one filed by around 390 local residents in October 2002, in which the Fukuoka High Court ordered the central government in July 2010 to pay about 369 million yen in damages to the plaintiffs, while turning down their plea for the suspension of early morning and evening flights.

While the plaintiffs in the upcoming suit will later decide the details of their claims, including the amount of compensation, they are aiming to file before the planned deployment of the MV-22 Osprey vertical takeoff and landing aircraft this year at the Futenma base, they said.

The U.S. military plan to deploy the aircraft has drawn opposition from Okinawa residents as it could

intensify noise pollution around the Marine base and due to concern over repeated crashes of the Osprey during its development.

Zenji Shimada, head of the plaintiffs, told a press conference in Naha that they will try to secure the suspension of flights at the Marine base, which was rejected in the previous suit.

Japan and the United States aim to relocate the Futenma base to the less populated Henoko area in Nago, also in Okinawa, but many local residents remain fiercely opposed to the plan to build a new military facility in the prefecture.

Kyodo Press, January 18, 2012

<http://mdn.mainichi.jp/mdnnews/national/archive/news/2012/01/18/20120118p2g00m0dm038000c.html>

Okinawa: Okinawans protest base environment assessment after gov't sneaks it in under darkness

NAHA — Under the cover of darkness in the predawn hours of Dec. 28, box after box containing environmental assessment documents on the Futenma Air Base relocation were quickly unloaded by national government employees at the prefectural office here.

Later in the day, Okinawans gathered at the prefectural office angrily protested against the national government for what they saw as an underhanded move to sneak in the forms, as well as against their own governor for accepting the documents that could push forward the relocation of the base to Henoko.

Hiroji Yamashiro, a member of a group opposing relocation of Futenma within Okinawa, had been keeping watch in front of the prefectural office. He says that at around 4 a.m. on the morning of Dec. 28, around 20 members of the Okinawa Defense Bureau arrived in four vehicles, unloaded and brought in the assessment forms, and left again, all in around a mere five minutes.

On the same day later in the evening, citizens opposed to the relocation of the Futenma base to Henoko steadily streamed into the prefectural office, where the governor's office is. Almost 100 people gathered, and they staged a sit-in, demanding that the governor come out and give an explanation to the prefecture's citizens.

When the prefecture's intention to accept the environmental assessment was announced at a protest gathering in the building, anger amongst those gathered was stoked.

"We cannot forgive the governor for accepting these low, thief-like actions of the Okinawa Defense Bureau," said Yamashiro.

Okinawa Gov. Hirokazu Nakaima later appeared in front of those gathered and said, "If an assessment fits all the necessary conditions, we have to accept it, and the environmental assessment fits the necessary conditions." When asked what he will do if the government files for permission to start filling land off of Henoko after finishing procedures related to the environmental assessment in June, Nakaima said, "There is no change in my stance that the base must be moved out of Okinawa."

One prefectural official said, "I agree the national government's actions are questionable. But as long as there is no legal problem with the assessment, we have to accept it."

The predawn drop off of the papers reminded Shoichi Chibana, 63, a former town councilman who was present at the protest, of how the government acted during his struggles with it 15 years ago, in 1996. He had owned land within the U.S. military's Sobe Communications Site in Okinawa, and after the period for its use by the U.S. military and Japanese government had come up, he asked for the return of the land. However, the Japanese government continued to keep the land occupied by the facility illegally for over a year and the problem evolved into a court case. Okinawa defense authorities at the time surrounded the Sobe Communications Site with barbed wire and even posted riot police to keep people out, Chibana says.

"Why could I not enter my own property?" says Chibana. "Then and now, the national government adheres to the U.S. while stomping on the will of the people of Okinawa."

Although the environmental assessment has been handed over, Chibana says, "There is still a chance to stop the new building of base facilities. I want to continue doing what I can."

Mainichi Shimbun, December 29, 2011

<http://mdn.mainichi.jp/mdnnews/national/archive/news/2011/12/29/20111229p2a00m0na005000c.html>

Okinawa acknowledges receipt of report on U.S. base relocation

NAHA (Kyodo) — Okinawa Prefecture acknowledged on Thursday receipt of a key report related to the controversial relocation of a U.S. Marine base within the prefecture, marking a step forward in the long-stalled relocation issue.

But the outlook on whether it will lead to a breakthrough in finally relocating the U.S. Marine Corps' Futenma Air Station is uncertain as the government of Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda has yet to persuade the local community to accept the relocation deal agreed on with the United States.

Delivering the environmental impact assessment report on the relocation to the prefectural government drew public attention late last year after protesters blocked the report's submission and the Defense Ministry managed to get it through by delivering it in the predawn hours when protesters were scarce.

Despite local protests, the central government stuck to its plan to submit the report to Okinawa before 2011 ended amid calls from Washington to make progress as soon as possible on the base relocation.

With the official receipt dated Dec. 28, Gov. Hirokazu Nakaima, who wants the Futenma base moved out of Okinawa altogether, will now have until March 27 to present his opinion, which can include asking for revisions in the report, to the central government.

Submission of the report marks one of the final stages in assessment procedures, which began in 2007, related to a Japan-U.S. agreement on relocating the base from a densely populated area in Ginowan to the more remote coastal area in Nago, both in Okinawa.

Residents of Okinawa, which has long shouldered the bulk of U.S. forces in Japan, remain opposed to the relocation plan and are demanding that the base be moved outside of the prefecture.

Nakaima, who as governor has the authority to grant permission for the land reclamation, has repeatedly said he will not give the green light, making the outlook for the relocation uncertain despite submission of the environmental impact assessment report.

The central government is aiming to complete the environmental assessment by around May and then seek permission from Nakaima for land reclamation.

But the government is cautious over the timing of asking for permission, with a ministry official saying that seeking permission before the prefectural assembly election in late May or June may focus local opposition to the relocation plan.

Kyodo Press, January 5, 2012

<http://mdn.mainichi.jp/mdnnews/national/archive/news/2012/01/05/20120105p2g00m0dm098000c.html>

Okinawa: Early Release of Key Okinawa Base Report Eyed

Naha, Okinawa Pref., Jan. 6 (Jiji Press)—The Japanese Defense Ministry considers releasing at an early date an environmental report related to a controversial U.S. base relocation within Okinawa Prefecture, the ministry's local bureau chief said Friday.

"We hope to create an opportunity to hear opinions from the people in Okinawa" about the report, a prerequisite for building a replacement facility for the U.S. Marine Corps' Futenma air station in Ginowan, Okinawa Defense Bureau chief Ro Manabe said at a press conference.

He expressed willingness to make the report public before Okinawa Governor Hirokazu Nakaima sends his written opinion on it to the ministry.

The report assesses the environmental impact of the planned Futenma base relocation to the Henoko coastal district of Nago, another city in the southern prefecture.

On Friday afternoon, the Okinawa Prefectural government accepted all related documents.

Jiji Press, January 6, 2012

<http://jen.jiji.com/jc/eng?g=eco&k=2012010600926>

Okinawa: Anti-U.S. base protesters blockade Okinawa Pref. Office to stop report delivery

NAHA — More than 100 people surrounded the Okinawa Prefectural Office early on Dec. 27, ready to block delivery of an environmental assessment needed for the construction of a new U.S. Marine

Corps air station in the prefecture.

The central government is committed to delivering the environmental assessment by the year's end, and it was expected to arrive on Dec. 27. The assessment is required to begin building a new base in the Henoko district of Nago to replace the much-maligned U.S. Marine Corps Air Station Futenma in the city of Ginowan. The citizens' groups around the prefectural office, however, were determined not to let the assessment reach its destination, surrounding delivery company trucks as they arrived and forcing those carrying copies of the report to turn back.

The blockade was set in motion by a prefectural citizens' group opposed to relocating the Futenma base inside Okinawa. Protesters began to gather on Dec. 26 and the blockade started just before 8 a.m. the following morning, with people holding sheets and placards saying "We will not allow delivery of the report!" and "Anger" barring the four entrances into the prefectural office.

When delivery trucks or other vehicles tried to get to the building, the protesters stood in front of them and asked the drivers, "What are you delivering?" and "What department are those things addressed to?" while also checking the names of recipients. Once the protesters confirmed the environmental assessment was not among a vehicle's cargo, they let it pass.

The atmosphere around the building turned tense at about 11:20 a.m. when a white delivery truck carrying about 10 cardboard boxes arrived. The protesters surrounded the vehicle and checked the sender with the driver, which revealed the boxes were from the Okinawa Defense Bureau — the local office of the Ministry of Defense. The protesters forced the driver to turn back, but the truck made another attempt to get to the prefectural office about 30 minutes later.

At the request of anti-base prefectural assembly members, a senior prefectural official called the defense bureau to confirm the boxes did in fact contain the environmental assessment. The delivery truck turned around again when the prefectural official told the defense bureau, "If you try to get the truck through like this there'll be an accident."

Hiroshi Yamashiro, head of the anti-base citizens' group, stated, "Today, the day the assessment was to be delivered, is the biggest and best platform for mounting a protest, and we want to stop delivery of the assessment anyway we can. We'll send any vehicle trying to deliver it home."

Meanwhile, the prefectural official, who by prefectural office rules was outside to advise and warn the protesters, said, "We expected a blockade, but didn't think it would get this extreme. If they keep forcibly checking the content of every delivery, we'll have to order the protesters to leave."

At the front entrance to the building, however, more than 10 anti-base assembly members and Ginowan city councillors were camped out to prevent the assessment from getting in. One, Japanese Communist Party prefectural assembly member Sogi Kayo, told the *Mainichi*, "We cannot forgive the central government for the allegiance it shows to the United States by issuing that assessment, even though the governor, the prefectural assembly, and every city, town and village in Okinawa is against relocating the base in the prefecture. If people from the Defense Ministry come, we will restrain them and persuade them to give up on delivering the report."

Mainichi Shimbun, December 27, 2011

<http://mdn.mainichi.jp/mdnnews/national/archive/news/2011/12/27/20111227p2a00m0na009000c.html>

Okinawa: Gov't delivers Futenma environmental report to Okinawa Pref. office

TOKYO (Kyodo) — The Defense Ministry on Wednesday delivered a key environmental impact assessment report on the relocation of the U.S. Marine Corps' Futenma Air Station within Okinawa Prefecture to the prefectural government, a day after its attempt to do so was blocked by local residents.

It remains unclear when the prefectural government will acknowledge formally receiving the report.

Ro Manabe, chief of the ministry's bureau in Okinawa, and bureau staff members delivered the report shortly after 4 a.m. Wednesday to a room for guards at the government office building in Naha.

Commenting on the predawn move, a senior official of the local government said, "Now that the report has been delivered, we cannot help but receive it."

But a senior official of the ministry said the number of copies of the report fell short of 20 as required by an Okinawa ordinance and the ministry does not yet know when it can deliver the remainder.

In Tokyo, Defense Minister Yasuo Ichikawa told reporters that delivery of the report at that time "could not be helped" in light of the protests, and said that the decision was made by the Okinawa Defense Bureau.

Ichikawa reiterated that the plan to complete submission of the report by the end of the year remains unchanged.

Asked why the central government is bent on submitting it before the year-end, Chief Cabinet Secretary Osamu Fujimura said at a news conference, "It is natural to present it as soon as possible once the report is done."

Submission of the roughly 7,000-page report marks one of the final stages in assessment procedures related to a Japan-U.S. agreement to relocate the Futenma base from a densely populated area in Ginowan to the less populated Henoko area in Nago, both in Okinawa.

The central government plans to complete the environmental assessment by around June and then seek permission from Okinawa Gov. Hirokazu Nakaima for land reclamation off Henoko to build a replacement airfield.

But Nakaima has urged the central government to move the Futenma base outside Okinawa. He reiterated Tuesday that he will not give the green light to the land reclamation work.

On Tuesday, a delivery company van carrying the document was blocked by about 200 protesters opposing the relocation plan. The vehicle turned back without delivering the document.

The report concluded that a U.S. plan to deploy MV-22 Osprey vertical takeoff and landing aircraft in Okinawa next year would pose no problem in terms of noise under the relocation plan and that the habitat of the dugong, an endangered marine mammal, is far from the planned land reclamation site.

Kyodo Press, December 28, 2011

<http://mdn.mainichi.jp/mdnnews/national/archive/news/2011/12/28/20111228p2g00m0dm019000c.html>
