

Protests growing against deployment of U.S. Marine Corps' Osprey aircraft in Japan

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Osprey deployment: Protests growing against deployment of Osprey in Japan

Protests are growing across the nation against the U.S. Marine Corps' planned deployment of vertical takeoff and landing Osprey aircraft in Japan.

In response, the National Governors' Association has adopted a resolution expressing opposition to the deployment of the aircraft in Japan.

Amid growing opposition, Defense Minister Satoshi Morimoto told a news conference on July 20 that Washington had officially notified Tokyo that Osprey aircraft would be introduced at the U.S. forces' Iwakuni base in Yamaguchi Prefecture on July 23 before being deployed to the U.S. Marine Corps Air Station Futenma in Okinawa Prefecture.

The Defense Ministry dispatched officials to the Yamaguchi prefectural and Iwakuni municipal governments to notify them of the schedule for introducing the aircraft.

However, Iwakuni Mayor Yoshihiko Fukuda has voiced opposition to the introduction of the aircraft to the U.S. base in the city.

"If the aircraft were forcibly introduced, mutual trust between the national and local governments could collapse, seriously affecting the Japan-U.S. security arrangement," he said.

The Japanese and U.S. governments' intention to go ahead with the deployment despite growing concern about the aircraft's safety have stirred further protests from the local governments that are expected to host the controversial aircraft officially known as MV-22.

On July 19, Iwakuni District Peace Forum, a group comprising local labor unions and other organizations, staged a sit-in protest in front of a civil hall in Iwakuni against the plan to unload Osprey aircraft at a local port and temporarily introduce them at Iwakuni base.

"The government's explanation about the safety of the aircraft is far from convincing. It has only heightened distrust, and adds to local residents' concern and confusion," said Satoshi Matoba,

chairman of the forum. "The government should also listen to voices of residents of Okinawa where the aircraft will be deployed."

Amid growing protests, key legislators within the ruling Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) have been under pressure to voice opposition to temporarily bringing Osprey aircraft into Yamaguchi Prefecture.

The DPJ Yamaguchi Prefecture chapter has told the Cabinet of Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda that it is opposed to introducing Osprey at Iwakuni base before the aircraft are shipped to Okinawa.

"The cause of Osprey accidents in Morocco and Florida haven't been clarified yet. We can't accept the introduction of the aircraft to Iwakuni base," said Yusaku Nishijima, secretary-general of the chapter.

Attendees of a local residents' rally against the introduction of Osprey at Iwakuni base on July 16, which was organized by the local chapter of the Japanese Trade Union Confederation (Rengo), adopted a resolution against the plan. Former Justice Minister Hideo Hiraoka, a DPJ member of the House of Representatives elected from the Yamaguchi No. 2 constituency, handed a copy of the resolution to DPJ Policy Research Committee Chairman Seiji Maehara.

An Okinawa prefectural residents' nonpartisan rally against the deployment is scheduled for Aug. 5. The DPJ's Okinawa chapter has urged the party headquarters as well as the Defense and Foreign ministries not to accept the deployment.

Masaki Hanashiro, chief policymaker at the chapter, has warned that the deployment of Osprey without local communities' consent "would heighten prefectural residents' anti-U.S. base sentiment and could trigger an island-wide struggle demanding removal of U.S. bases other than Air Station Futenma."

The National Governors' Association adopted a resolution during a meeting in Takamatsu on July 19, saying, "We cannot accept the deployment as the aircraft's safety hasn't been confirmed yet."

The resolution points out that the temporary introduction of the MV-22 at Iwakuni base and their test flights "are feared to seriously affect the maintenance of good relations between Japan and the United States."

In response to opposition from local communities slated to host the aircraft, Maehara met with Defense Minister Satoshi Morimoto on July 19 and criticized the government's intention to accept the deployment of Osprey aircraft as planned.

"I can't agree to allow the deployment to go ahead as scheduled while training flights of the aircraft have been suspended in the United States. Yamaguchi and Okinawa residents are more opposed to it," Maehara was quoted as telling Morimoto. "If a worst-case scenario came true, it could badly damage the Japan-U.S. alliance. We should pause (before deciding whether to go ahead with the deployment)."

The largest opposition Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and its former ruling coalition partner New Komeito have adopted a cautious approach to the planned deployment of Osprey aircraft in the wake of crashes.

"All local communities concerned voiced opposition to the deployment due to fears about the safety of the aircraft. They shouldn't be deployed or operated without the understanding of local governments and residents," said Komeito Secretary-General Yoshihisa Inoue.

LDP President Sadakazu Tanigaki, meanwhile, told a recent news conference: "It's difficult to go ahead with the deployment as scheduled. Japan should proactively go through the procedures for confirming the safety and rules on flights."

Mainichi Shimbun, July 20, 2012

<http://mainichi.jp/english/english/newsselect/news/20120720p2a00m0na015000c.html>

Osprey deployment: Local opposition heightens before Osprey deployment Mon.

IWAKUNI, Japan (Kyodo) — Local opposition heightened Friday against a U.S. military plan to deploy controversial MV-22 Osprey transport aircraft at a base in Yamaguchi Prefecture, western Japan, with the planes set to arrive on Monday.

After a Defense Ministry official informed local authorities of the date for the Ospreys' arrival at the U.S. Marine Corps' Iwakuni Air Station, Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda vowed that the safety of the tilt-rotor aircraft will be ensured before they start flying in Japan.

Doubts about the safety of the planes have been growing in the wake of recent crashes of the aircraft in Morocco and Florida. Conclusive findings from a U.S. probe into the crashes have yet to be disclosed.

Iwakuni Mayor Yoshihiko Fukuda told Masayoshi Tatsumi, head of the Defense Ministry's regional bureau, in their meeting that the city opposes the central government's decision to let the deployment proceed despite mounting local opposition, and asked Noda's government to do its utmost to stop the process.

The United States intends to bring the MV-22 Ospreys to the Iwakuni base for test flights before eventually deploying them at the Marines' Futenma Air Station in Okinawa Prefecture.

It will be the first time MV-22s have been brought into Japan since the U.S. military began operating the aircraft in earnest in the late 2000s, according to the ministry.

The U.S. military will replace its aging CH-46 helicopters with the Osprey at the Futenma base, which is situated in a crowded residential area in Ginowan, Okinawa. Osprey flight operations are expected to be in full swing in October.

Early this month, a civilian cargo ship carrying the first 12 Ospreys set sail from San Diego for Iwakuni. On Friday afternoon, the ship made a call at South Korea's Busan port, South Korean government officials said.

During a trip outside Tokyo, Noda told reporters, "We will provide a thorough explanation to the local communities about the (Osprey's) safety and make efforts to secure their consent."

The government aims to discuss safe Osprey operations during a monthly dialogue of foreign and defense officials from Tokyo and Washington, which handles issues such as management of the Japan-U.S. Status of Forces Agreement.

Tatsumi told Fukuda that while the aircraft may undergo engine maintenance on the ground, "The U.S. government has told us that it will refrain from flight operations in Japan until their safety is confirmed again."

Fukuda said, "It's very disappointing that the deep feelings of the local people did not affect the government. I want the state to do its utmost to stop the (deployment) process."

In an apparent sign of resentment, the mayor did not look at the defense ministry official while listening to the schedule for the arrival of the aircraft at the start of their talks.

Yamaguchi Gov. Sekinari Nii told reporters, "We hoped that (the central government) would comply with the wishes of local people, so I'm upset they let us down."

"I question Japan-U.S. security ties which do not take into account the safety of local residents," he added.

Senior Vice Defense Minister Shu Watanabe, during a meeting in Tokyo with U.S. Deputy Defense Secretary Ashton Carter, expressed caution over proceeding with the deployment, saying that forcing the deployment could affect the future of SOFA and the countries' security treaty.

Carter said he takes the issue seriously and promised the United States will promptly provide information about the recent Osprey accidents, Watanabe said.

Foreign Minister Koichiro Gemba, who met separately with Carter, was quoted by his ministry as telling the visiting U.S. official that both countries need to cooperate and dispel local concerns.

The central government's stance to remain in line with the U.S. plan has been slammed even by some lawmakers within the ruling Democratic Party of Japan and its junior coalition partner the People's New Party, with Noda being criticized for having underestimated growing concern about the safety of the aircraft.

PNP secretary general Mikio Shimoji criticized the government's handling of the issue in a news conference. "The government does not listen at all even if we propose a review," he said, noting that his party has doubts about the plan.

Shimoji said he and Seiji Maehara, the DPJ's policy chief, held talks and agreed that the deployment should be put off until after measures to prevent similar accidents are in place.

Asked to comment on the growing calls to reconsider the Osprey deployment in Japan, Gemba said in a news conference, "I don't think it's easy to turn things around."

Kyodo Press, July 21, 2012

<http://mainichi.jp/english/english/newsselect/news/20120721p2g00m0dm024000c.html>

Okinawa to hold mass rally on Aug. 5 to oppose Osprey deployment

NAHA, Japan (Kyodo) — The Okinawa prefectural assembly decided Friday to hold a large rally for local residents on Aug. 5 to oppose the U.S. plan to deploy MV-22 Osprey tilt-rotor aircraft at a

controversial U.S. Marine Corps air base on the country's main southwestern island.

Assembly members hope to use the "rally for people of Okinawa Prefecture" to communicate their opposition to both the Japanese and U.S. governments before the transport aircraft, which have suffered a series of fatal crashes overseas, go into use at the Marines' Futenma Air Station in October.

The rally will be held at a seaside park in Ginowan from 3 p.m. on Aug. 5. Ginowan hosts the base, whose proximity to residential areas has worried many residents over potential crashes and other incidents involving the MV-22 aircraft.

Assembly speaker Masaharu Kina said he hopes to make the event one of the largest rallies ever held in the prefecture for residents.

Amid mounting calls for Gov. Hirokazu Nakaima to participate in the rally, Nakaima said at an assembly meeting Friday he is considering "whether it's a good thing for the head of the administrative body to take the lead or whether there's a different approach."

The United States plans to deploy the vertical takeoff and landing aircraft at Futenma after transporting them to the Marines' Iwakuni base in Yamaguchi Prefecture in late July.

Kyodo Press, July 07, 2012

<http://mainichi.jp/english/english/newsselect/news/20120707p2g00m0dm038000c.html>

Okinawa, Iwakuni reject Osprey deployment in talks with defense minister

NAHA/IWAKUNI, Japan (Kyodo) — Okinawa Gov. Hirokazu Nakaima rejected a U.S. plan to deploy the MV-22 Osprey transport aircraft at the Marine Corps' Futenma Air Station in the southwestern Japan prefecture during talks Sunday with visiting Japanese Defense Minister Satoshi Morimoto, citing safety concerns after a series of accidents abroad involving the aircraft.

Yamaguchi Gov. Sekinari Nii and Iwakuni Mayor Yoshihiko Fukuda cited the same reason in rejecting a U.S. plan to deploy the aircraft at the Marines' Iwakuni Air Station in Yamaguchi Prefecture for trial flights ahead of its deployment in Okinawa, during talks with Morimoto who traveled to the western Japan prefecture later in the day.

Although neither the local nor national governments have legal grounds to reject the plan, according to the Japanese Defense Ministry, Nakaima said, "We just have to reject it as it is a question of safety." The talks took place as around 220 protesters held a rally outside the Okinawa prefectural government building.

The Iwakuni mayor told Morimoto, "We cannot accept it as safety concerns have not been removed." Yamaguchi Gov. Nii said the U.S. plan is being pursued "without any debate" and he is opposed to the deployment being carried out as is.

Morimoto's trip to Okinawa, which hosts the bulk of U.S. forces in Japan, came after the United States officially notified Japan on Friday that it would commence full-scale Osprey flight operations at the Futenma base in early October, after trial flights from late July at the Iwakuni base.

“If the United States forces through the Osprey deployment in Okinawa and an accident or other incident occurs, we will have no choice but to seek an immediate shutdown of all (U.S. military) bases” in the prefecture, Nakaima told reporters after the talks with Morimoto, indicating arrival of the Ospreys would further worsen local sentiment.

In the talks, Morimoto, on his first visit to the prefecture as defense minister, sought local acceptance for the deployment plan by emphasizing that Tokyo will urge Washington to provide more detailed information on recent Osprey crashes. He said investigations so far into the causes of the accidents involving the aircraft, which are capable of vertical takeoff and landing, “are not yet complete.”

The governor, meanwhile, reiterated his call for the relocation of the Futenma base outside of the prefecture, as opposed to the Japan-U.S. plan to transfer it within Okinawa.

Morimoto apologized for the stalled relocation of the base, saying, “I’m sorry that it is not making smooth progress due to a lack of effort by the Democratic Party of Japan-led government.”

During a meeting Saturday, Mayor Atsushi Sakima of Ginowan, where the Futenma base is located, called on Morimoto to try to prevent the Osprey deployment, saying the plan is “very regrettable and unacceptable” as “it’s an undeniable fact that Ospreys crashed twice in as many months.”

The defense minister replied that he will “carry local opinions back (to Tokyo) and take them into account while thinking about what the central government should do.”

Facing local opposition, Tokyo and Washington have agreed not to conduct Osprey test flights at the Iwakuni base until more information about the recent crashes of an MV-22 Osprey in Morocco in April and a U.S. Air Force CV-22 Osprey in Florida in late June is provided to Japan. Washington is expected to present the results of its probe into the accidents to Tokyo in August.

Kyodo Press, July 02, 2012

<http://mainichi.jp/english/english/newsselect/news/20120702p2g00m0dm025000c.html>

Okinawa: Okinawa assembly adopts resolution against Osprey deployment

NAHA, Japan (Kyodo) — The prefectural assembly of Okinawa adopted a resolution Tuesday in opposition to the planned deployment of the MV-22 Osprey at the U.S. Marine Corps’ Futenma Air Station amid safety concerns over the military transport aircraft.

The resolution says the governments of Japan and the United States are aiming to impose the Osprey on Okinawa against the wishes of the prefecture that the risks posed to the local community by the Futenma base will be removed as soon as possible.

It also seeks the early closure of the Futenma base and its reversion to Okinawa.

Concerns over the safety of the Osprey are growing in Okinawa in the wake of a series of accidents involving the aircraft.

The MV-22 Osprey crashed during a drill with Moroccan forces on April 11, killing two Marines and

injuring two others. On June 13, a CV-22 Osprey aircraft crashed during training in southern Florida, injuring five crew members.

Kyodo Press, June 26, 2012

<http://mainichi.jp/english/english/newsselect/news/20120626p2g00m0dm073000c.html>

Osprey deployment to Okinawa in full swing in Oct., U.S. tells Japan

TOKYO (Kyodo) — The United States officially notified Japan on Friday of its plan to deploy the MV-22 Osprey transport aircraft, setting the time frame for full-scale Osprey flight operations at the U.S. Marine Corps' Futenma Air Station in Okinawa Prefecture to early October.

Facing local opposition to the Osprey, Tokyo and Washington have agreed not to conduct test flights of the MV-22 at the Marine Corps' Iwakuni Air Station in Yamaguchi Prefecture until more information about recent crashes abroad involving the transport aircraft is provided to Japan, the two governments said.

Nonetheless, the U.S. notice immediately sparked anger from the two base-hosting governments, painting a bleak outlook for securing local support for the envisioned deployment.

Okinawa Gov. Hirokazu Nakaima told reporters in Naha that he regards this as "extremely regrettable" and cannot just accept the plan.

Yamaguchi Gov. Sekinari Nii told journalists at his prefectural office it is "unthinkable" for the deployment process to move forward when safety has not been confirmed and that he had hoped their countries would have dealt with the matter more cautiously.

The United States' plan is to station the Ospreys first at the Iwakuni base in July for safety checks and trial flights before deploying them to the Futenma base in August. The tilt-rotor aircraft is scheduled to arrive in Iwakuni in late July, according to a U.S. government release.

But the deployment to Futenma may be delayed beyond that month depending on the outcome of the U.S. probe on the two crashes involving an Osprey, which has further fueled local fears over the plane's safety record during test flights.

Defense Minister Satoshi Morimoto said in a news conference after the notification that the initial plan to temporarily station Ospreys at Iwakuni for about 10 to 14 days "could be extended" based on the timing of the release of U.S. investigations.

The decision not to conduct any MV-22 Osprey flights until more information about recent crashes is provided to Japan was made out of U.S. "consideration" for concerns in Japan about the aircraft's safety, Morimoto said, calling this a "rare step."

In its press release, the United States noted MV-22 flight operations will be suspended only in Japan and that the MV-22 and CV-22 Ospreys will continue to operate in other places.

Washington plans to replace the aging CH-46 helicopters currently at the Futenma base, located in a crowded residential area in the city of Ginowan, with 24 Ospreys.

“Basing the Osprey in Okinawa will significantly strengthen the United States’ ability to provide for the defense of Japan, perform humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations and fulfill other alliance roles,” according to a press release by the U.S. Department of Defense.

The Osprey can travel roughly twice as fast as the CH-46 and has a flight range around six times longer. It also has vertical takeoff and landing capability.

Results of the probe into the causes of two recent Osprey aircraft crashes are expected to be presented to the Japanese government in August.

This weekend the defense minister will visit Okinawa and Yamaguchi to seek local consent for the deployment. But Morimoto acknowledged the difficulty in convincing residents, saying he is “not confident” of gaining local consent with just the current information the government has.

Local fears concerning deployment of the aircraft were heightened by two recent accidents — the crash of an MV-22 Osprey in Morocco in April and of a U.S. Air Force CV-22 Osprey in Florida earlier this month.

Regarding the fatal April 11 accident in Morocco, the United States has told Japan there was no mechanical problem with the aircraft, although conclusive findings have yet to be released. On June 13 a CV-22 Osprey aircraft crashed during training in southern Florida, injuring five crew members aboard.

The Japanese government is calling on the United States to provide more information about both accidents.

Putting test flights in Yamaguchi on hold until after the investigation into the Florida accident makes further progress raises the prospect of a slight delay in the Futenma deployment in August, Japanese government sources said.

After the deployment, several Ospreys will be dispatched every month to Iwakuni base and Camp Fuji in Gotemba, Shizuoka Prefecture, for drills. Drill flights at low altitude are also being planned in parts of Honshu as well as the Shikoku and Kyushu regions in western and southwestern Japan, respectively.

Kyodo Press, June 30, 2012

<http://mainichi.jp/english/english/newsselect/news/20120630p2g00m0dm002000c.html>
