

Okinawa mood getting worse – Crime, Osprey add to anger over pervasive U.S. military bases

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OKINAWA, Okinawa Pref. – For nearly 70 years, Okinawa has gotten more than its share of America's military – more jets rattling homes, more crimes rattling nerves.

It was the site of a horrific land battle in World War II. It endured 27 years under U.S. administration and continues to host two-thirds of Japan's U.S. bases.

The 1995 rape of a schoolgirl by two U.S. Marines and a sailor spread rage across the island of about 1.4 million. Now another rape and other crimes allegedly committed by U.S. servicemen have triggered a new wave of anger, though the suspects make up a tiny portion of the 28,000 U.S. service members stationed here.

Some Okinawans get emotional just talking about the stress they feel living in the U.S. military's shadow.

"Everywhere, everyone who has a daughter is feeling this way," said Tomoharu Nakasone, a father of four daughters, choking back tears.

Nakasone, who runs an FM radio station, grew up with the bases and thought he was used to the idea, even forgiving a fatal 2009 hit-and-run by a serviceman as a mistake.

But he was outraged by the latest rape – in a parking lot in October – and petrified by a bizarre incident weeks later in which a 13-year-old boy was beaten in his own home while watching TV, allegedly by a U.S. airman.

"Entering someone's home is simply not normal. It is the lowest of human behavior," he said.

There has always been a degree of strain between Okinawans and U.S. service members, but it has grown more pronounced in recent months, not only because of crime but because of safety concerns surrounding the MV-22 Osprey, the hybrid aircraft with tilting rotors recently brought to the prefecture.

The U.S. service members, mostly marines and air force personnel, are stationed in Okinawa under a bilateral alliance that is the cornerstone of Japan's foreign policy.

U.S. Ambassador John Roos and the commander of the U.S. forces in Japan have apologized for the crimes, promised to cooperate with the Japanese police investigations and increased restrictions on the forces.

“We take the relationship with Japan very serious,” U.S. Forces Japan spokesman Lt. Col. David Honchul said. “That’s why these actions have all taken place because we are trying to show the citizens of Japan that we take this serious, and we are going to address this. And it’s also telling our own service members that we take this very seriously.”

After the October rape, an 11 p.m. to 5 a.m. curfew was set for all military personnel in Japan.

The rules were tightened further after a drunken driving accident off base last month. Now U.S. forces in Okinawa are barred from buying or consuming alcohol off base. Even on base, sales of alcohol stop from 10 p.m. to 8 a.m.

Despite the military’s efforts, many Okinawans appear fed up with American service members.

“They are being trained to kill for war. They can’t look at a person as a human being,” said Hiyori Mekaru, a 40-year-old nurse who has lived all her life in Okinawa. “I am angry. I don’t want this kind of future, where we must have our children grow up, learning the names of military planes.”

Ironically, the U.S. military’s influence over Okinawans is evident even in their protests over the bases. They shout at passing cars, “Get out of here!” and “We hate you!” in good vernacular English that is unusual for most Japanese but typical for Okinawans. During one recent rally protesters closed by singing “We Shall Overcome.”

Okinawans got their hopes up about getting rid of the bases in 2009, when the Democratic Party of Japan won control from the conservatives that have ruled the country almost incessantly since the end of World War II.

The first DPJ prime minister, Yukio Hatoyama, promised the rest of Japan would share in the burden of hosting American bases. But almost as soon as he made his promise, he stepped down in disgrace.

The Okinawa bases had faded to a nonissue by the time of the general election last Sunday, which was dominated by concerns about economic malaise and the Fukushima nuclear crisis. Japan has had one prime minister after another over the past several years, making any negotiations difficult.

And so the plan to relocate Marine Corps Air Station Futenma, promised after the 1995 rape, to coastal and less densely populated Henoko on another part of Okinawa has gone nowhere.

Yoshikazu Tamaki, a member of the Okinawa Prefectural Assembly, said keeping the bases on an island that makes up less than 0.5 percent of Japan’s territory is “systematic discrimination.”

He said he is disgusted by how Okinawa has been treated by its own government, and suggested that officials in Washington are more sympathetic about Okinawa’s plight than those in Tokyo.

“These are young soldiers here, maybe 18, maybe 20,” he said. “They are waging war every day. They are coming to Okinawa as a military base. The way we feel and the way they feel will never meet.”

Japan must weigh Okinawans’ complaints against its relationship with the U.S. military, which it values all the more as Tokyo quarrels with China over the Senkaku Islands and watches nuclear-armed North Korea test its missile technology, most recently with a rocket launch last week.

Okinawans are angry that Japan approved the Osprey deployment, which began in October, though the government has asked for and received additional assurances of the aircraft's safety.

Washington says the Osprey is safe and is needed to ensure regional security. Okinawans are concerned about two Osprey crashes earlier this year, in Florida and Morocco, and because Futenma, where the aircraft make nearly daily test flights, is smack in the middle of the crowded residential area of Ginowan.

Honchul said the Osprey is "a very safe and capable aircraft" that has operated on Okinawa Island without incident. Investigations into the two crashes did not find fault with the aircraft, he said.

Okinawans, however, remember how a U.S. helicopter dropped eight years ago into Okinawa International University's campus, next to Futenma. Crewmen were hurt.

Over the last several months, dozens of people have been gathering daily at a Futenma gate to protest the Osprey. Kazunobu Akamine, who makes and delivers lunches for a living, was among the most boisterous protesters.

He said his son was nearly killed in the 2004 helicopter crash; he had gone to the university to pick up empty lunch boxes. Talking as if World War II were yesterday, he said his grandfather was fatally shot in the head while hiding in the mountains from U.S. soldiers.

Akamine also talked about how proud he was of his father, who supported his family by checking cargo on the U.S. base, but also secretly participated in antibase rallies.

"There are so many people like that in Okinawa," Akamine said.

YURI KAGEYAMA, AP, December 21, 2012

* <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/text/nn20121221f1.html>

3,000 hold anti-Osprey march near U.S. base in Okinawa

NAHA, Okinawa Pref. - A crowd of about 3,000 marched through the streets near a contentious U.S. Marine base in Ginowan, Okinawa Prefecture, on Sunday to protest its use of the Osprey tilt-rotor transport aircraft.

They also protested the long-stalled plan to keep Marine Corps Air Station Futenma within Okinawa, and a spate of recent incidents involving U.S. servicemen that has rekindled local anger against U.S. troops there.

Residents and supporters were seen demonstrating near the main gate of the base, with some demanding that the controversial MV-22 Osprey and the U.S. military leave Okinawa.

The Marine Corps started conducting Osprey training flights shortly after a dozen of the helicopter-airplane hybrids were deployed there in October.

Tomoyuki Kobashikawa, who came down from Uruma to protest, recalled when a U.S. F-100 super

sabre crashed at Miyamori Elementary School in 1959, killing 17 people. The school was near his home.

“An accident will certainly happen if the Ospreys continue to fly for five or 10 years,” the 70-year-old said. “Before that happens, the aircraft must be pulled out.”

Eijun Maedomari, a 70-year-old resident of Urasoe, expressed concern about the government being led again by the Liberal Democratic Party, which advocated keeping the Futenma base in the prefecture.

Residents have been clamoring for the base to be kicked out of Okinawa, an island prefecture that hosts about 74 percent of all U.S. military facilities in Japan in terms of land almost 40 years since it was returned following the U.S. Occupation.

Kyodo Press, December 24, 2012

* <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/text/nn20121224a9.html>

Okinawa seeks probe of 'illegal' Osprey flights

NAHA, Okinawa Pref. – Okinawa has formally asked the central government to investigate allegedly unauthorized flights conducted by tilt-rotor MV-22 Ospreys deployed to the U.S. Futenma air base.

In a written request filed Tuesday, local authorities in Okinawa claimed that some 318 Osprey flights violated safety rules agreed on by Tokyo and Washington since the contentious deployment in October of 12 Osprey transport aircraft to U.S. Marine Corps Air Station Futenma.

Okinawa Gov. Hirokazu Nakaima addressed the request to Hirofumi Takeda, head of the Defense Ministry's Okinawa Defense Bureau, and to Haruhisa Takeuchi, the Foreign Ministry's point man for Okinawa issues. Videos and photos showing Ospreys allegedly breaching the safety rules were included among the materials submitted.

The Okinawa authorities called on incoming Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's government to check whether the U.S. Marine Corps is following the safety rules for Osprey flights, to publicly disclose the probe's findings and to outline the Marine Corps' flight training schedule for the MV-22s in airspace above the nation's main islands.

“Safety concerns among the people of Okinawa have not been dispelled,” Nakaima stated in the request.

A survey by the Okinawa Prefectural Government and 27 municipalities hosting U.S. bases in the prefecture confirmed there were 517 Osprey flights in October and November. According to the local authorities, 318 of them appear to have violated the new flight safety regulations, including a ban on the MV-22s operating in helicopter mode above residential areas.

Jiji Press, December 27, 2012

* <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/text/nn20121227a8.html>

Abe to stick to Futenma script, keep base in Okinawa

YAMAGUCHI - The presumptive prime minister, Shinzo Abe, said Friday he will try to gain local support for a plan to replace a key U.S. base in Okinawa while upholding Tokyo's accord with Washington over the transfer.

Abe, who heads the conservative Liberal Democratic Party, said at a news conference at the Yamaguchi Prefectural Government that he wants to "make efforts toward seeking the consent of the local community" for moving U.S. Marine Corps Air Station Futenma to the Henoko area in Nago, farther north on Okinawa Island from its current location in the city of Ginowan.

Abe's remarks signal that his incoming government, despite local resistance, will pursue the existing plan to move shift Futenma's operations to the Henoko coast adjoining Camp Schwab.

The plan to replace Futenma with a new airstrip in Okinawa has long been a source of tension between the central government and local residents, who want the base to move out of Okinawa, home to the bulk of the U.S. military installations in Japan.

Kyodo Press, December 22, 2012

* <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/text/nn20121222b5.html>

U.S. airman's home intrusion draws fire — Entry, drunken assault follow sailors' recent alleged rape

The government lodged a protest Friday with Washington over the reported break-in and assault by a U.S. serviceman in Okinawa, an incident that comes less than three weeks after a high-profile alleged rape by two U.S. sailors of a woman in the prefecture.

According to the Okinawa Prefectural Police, a drunken member of the U.S. Air Force from the Kadena base become violent at a bar in the village of Yomitan around 1 a.m. Friday, violating a new curfew imposed in the wake of the alleged rape. The man's name is being withheld by Japanese authorities.

The suspect reportedly broke into an apartment on the third floor of the building housing the bar and, while trying to flee, struck a 13-year-old boy. The man reportedly then jumped off the third floor and as of Friday evening was being treated at a U.S. Navy hospital in Okinawa for injuries sustained in the fall.

"It's inexcusable to go out, let alone hitting a boy, especially after a new curfew was imposed" following the rape incident, said Foreign Minister Koichiro Genba, adding the Foreign Ministry will lodge a further protest at a higher level of the U.S. government.

During a news conference later in the day, however, Chief Cabinet Secretary Osamu Fujimura said the government will not request the suspect be handed over to Japanese authorities, saying the U.S. side is fully cooperating with the investigation. "We don't believe we need to seek custody" of the alleged perpetrator of the attack, Fujimura said.

Under the bilateral Status of Forces Agreement, the suspect in U.S. custody will not be transferred unless Japan indicts him. Some domestic observers argue key evidence could be lost during that time.

Summoned by the Foreign Ministry, U.S. Ambassador to Japan John Roos met with Vice Foreign Minister Shuji Kira and pledged Washington's full cooperation in investigating the case.

"It's an understatement to say I am very upset with the reported incident in Okinawa," Roos told reporters after his meeting with Kira. "First and foremost, we are obviously very concerned with the well-being of this young man."

The incident occurred less than three weeks after the U.S. Forces Japan imposed a curfew from 11 p.m. to 5 a.m. for all American service members, including those on temporary assignment, following the alleged rape.

The case will further fan local opposition to the presence of U.S. military personnel in Okinawa, which for years has carried the burden of hosting the majority of U.S. bases and forces stationed in Japan.

Amid mounting opposition to the U.S. military presence in the prefecture following the alleged rape, the forces started reviewing service members' liberty policies.

But cosmetic changes are unlikely to appease Okinawans, who have witnessed such preventative measures before, including the imposition of previous temporary curfews, and believe they have little impact on U.S. military personnel since they have been repeatedly violated them.

AYAKO MIE, *Japan Times* Staff writer, November 3, 2012

* <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/text/nn20121103a1.html>

(Information from Jiji added)

Marine arrested for trespass in Okinawa

Police have arrested a U.S. Marine from the Futenma air base on Okinawa Island on suspicion of trespassing, fueling local anger over crimes committed by U.S. service members and demands for stricter regulations.

The police said 1st Lt. Tomas Chanquet, 24, of U.S. Marine Corps Air Station Futenma, allegedly sneaked into a room through an unlocked door and fell asleep. He was spotted by a resident, who alerted the police.

The alleged rape by two U.S. Navy sailors of a woman in Okinawa last month enraged locals and reignited deep-rooted hostility against the U.S. military presence in the prefecture, which hosts

more than half of the 52,000 American troops stationed in Japan.

Despite an ensuing curfew on all U.S. service members deployed in Japan, two weeks later a U.S. airman allegedly assaulted a teenager during a drunken home invasion on Okinawa Island.

Sunday's incident raises further questions about the effectiveness of the curfew and other disciplinary steps taken since the alleged rape.

AP, November 19, 2012

* <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/text/nn20121119a7.html>

Crimes linked to U.S. forces spur calls for SOFA (Status of Forces Agreement) revision

Allegations that a drunken U.S. airman broke into an apartment in Okinawa and belted a teenager have heightened local calls for the bilateral accord protecting the rights of American service members in Japan to be amended.

The incident occurred less than three weeks after the arrests of two U.S. sailors for allegedly raping a woman in the city of Okinawa. The prefecture has long hosted the bulk of U.S. military facilities and personnel stationed in the country.

Following the sailors' arrests, the U.S. military in mid-October took the unusual step of introducing a nightly curfew on all personnel at its bases to improve discipline and avoid further damaging incidents. But the airman's alleged home invasion and assault in the early hours of Friday morning suggests the move has failed to serve its purpose.

The 24-year-old man, who is stationed at the U.S. Kadena Air Base, is believed to be receiving treatment at a hospital on a U.S. base for various injuries, including broken bones, after falling from the third floor of the building housing the apartment he invaded. His identity has been withheld by authorities.

The incident hardly improved sentiment toward U.S. military personnel among Okinawa residents, who were already fuming about Tokyo's decision to allow Washington to deploy tilt-rotor MV-22 Osprey aircraft to U.S. Marine Corps Air Station Futenma, despite their questionable safety record and two high profile crashes this year, including a fatal accident in Morocco.

Satoshi Morimoto, who as defense minister oversees bilateral security matters with the United States, attended a meeting of prefectural governors, including Okinawa Gov. Hirokazu Nakaima, at the Prime Minister's Official Residence on the day of the airman's alleged home invasion.

"I can't look the Okinawa governor squarely in the face," a visibly disturbed Morimoto said during the meeting, avoiding all eye contact with Nakaima. "I am truly sorry and cannot apologize enough."

"We need assurances of effective measures (from the United States) rather than repeatedly being told discipline is being reinforced," Foreign Minister Koichiro Genba told the meeting.

On possible steps to stem crimes by U.S. service members, a high-ranking Foreign Ministry official said: "If there had been anything that could have been done, it would have already been taken care of. If you ask if there are any measures other than a curfew, that's difficult to answer."

Nakaima issued a statement Friday saying he was "compelled to question the effectiveness" of the curfew. The governor plans to urge both Tokyo and Washington to review the terms of the bilateral Status of Forces Agreement, which sets the jurisdictional parameters within which Japanese authorities can deal with U.S. service personnel.

Nakaima said the treaty has effectively turned Okinawa into "a pocket of extraterritorial jurisdiction."

In the airman's case, Okinawa police have not asked the U.S. military to transfer the hospitalized suspect into their custody, arguing there is little likelihood he will flee or destroy evidence.

"U.S. Ambassador to Japan (John) Roos has said (the U.S.) pledged complete cooperation with Japan's investigation, so there is no need for us to request a custody transfer before an indictment," Foreign Ministry press secretary Yutaka Yokoi said Friday.

But there have been instances where American personnel have fled to U.S. bases after allegedly committing crimes, making it difficult for Japanese authorities to prosecute them.

Following the rape of a 12-year-old girl by two marines and a U.S. Navy corpsman in Okinawa in 1995, Tokyo and Washington cleared the way for military-linked suspects in serious crimes, including murder and rape, to be transferred to Japanese custody before prosecutors file charges.

But ultimately, it is still left up to the "sympathetic consideration" of U.S. forces whether to acquiesce to such transfer requests.

"The best solution is to close all U.S. bases, but if that is impossible, we are left with no other option than to revise the SOFA agreement," said Junji Kawano, a municipal assembly member in Nago who fiercely opposes the planned relocation of the Futenma base to his district.

"Investigations will be marred by the agreement if (a suspect) flees to an American base or out of the country," Kawano said. "Unless the SOFA is revised, we can't change U.S. troops' way of thinking that they can do whatever they want."

Kyodo Press, Nov. 4, 2012

* <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/text/nn20121104a6.html>

Protests in Tokyo against U.S. Osprey aircraft

TOKYO (AP) — Thousands of people have rallied against American deployment of Osprey military aircraft on a southern Japanese island amid escalating anti-U.S. military sentiment following recent crimes.

Protesters gathered Sunday at a Tokyo park demanding removal of 12 MV-22 Osprey hybrid aircraft from Okinawa. Ospreys were deployed in October despite local opposition over safety concerns

following two crashes elsewhere.

They chanted, "Ospreys out! Marine Corps out!"

Anger is running high days after a U.S. airman allegedly assaulted a teenage boy on Okinawa, just two weeks after a curfew was imposed on all 52,000 U.S. troops in Japan after the arrest of two Navy sailors in the alleged rape of a local woman.

Associated Press, November 05, 2012

* <http://mainichi.jp/english/english/newsselect/news/20121105p2g00m0dm001000c.html>

Residents near Futenma file base noise lawsuit

NAHA, Okinawa Pref. - Residents living near U.S. Marine Corps Air Station Futenma in Okinawa sued for damages Thursday for excessive noise levels.

Lawyers for the 1,199 plaintiffs demanded ¥470 million in compensation from the central government during the first session before the Naha District Court's branch in the city of Okinawa.

Legal representatives for the central government in turn asked the court to dismiss the lawsuit.

The damages claim comes on the heels of the recent, and bitterly opposed, deployment of tilt-rotor MV-22 Ospreys at the base.

At the hearing, Hideo Miyaguni, who heads the legal team representing the residents, said they can't accept the base's continued presence in the crowded city of Ginowan.

Though demanding compensation, the plaintiffs' ultimate goal is to seek the facility's early relocation, Miyaguni said.

The plaintiffs allege their neighborhoods have been exposed to a Weighted Equivalent Continuous Perceived Noise Level (WECPNL) of 75 or higher over three years beginning in late July 2009 - higher than the noise level in subway cars.

The suit is separate from one in which more than 3,000 plaintiffs are demanding an end to flights at the base and damages for noise-induced illness.

Japan and the U.S. have agreed to relocate the Futenma air station to the less populated Henoko area farther north on Okinawa Island, but local residents continue to demand it be moved outside the prefecture altogether and have stalled this plan for years.

Kyodo Press, November 9, 2012

* <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/text/nn20121109a4.html>
