

Okinawa : Nago mayoral race and the Futenma base issue

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Pair of pro base-relocation candidates likely to split Nago mayoral race vote

NAGO, Okinawa — There are now two men in favor of relocating U.S. Marine Corps Air Station Futenma to this city running for Nago mayor against the anti-relocation incumbent, a development likely to split the pro-relocation vote on election day.

Former Nago Mayor Yoshikazu Shimabukuro, 67, declared his candidacy in the Jan. 19 mayoral election on Oct. 30. Since Shimabukuro advocates relocating the Futenma air base to the Henoko district of Nago, he is expected to split the pro-relocation votes with Bunshin Suematsu, 65, an Okinawa Prefectural Assembly member of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). Bunshin announced his candidacy earlier this month, backed by pro-relocation municipal assembly members and business figures.

The two candidates are set to face off against anti-relocation incumbent Susumu Inamine, 68.

The move has startled the central government and the LDP, which have attempted to put forth a single pro-relocation candidate to help win approval from Okinawa Gov. Hirokazu Nakaima for a coastal reclamation project needed for the expanded Henoko base by the end of the year.

Because calls are mounting in Okinawa for relocating the Futenma base outside the prefecture, Suematsu has not officially clarified his position on the base relocation from the city of Ginowan. He is also looking to make regional promotion a major campaign issue and join hands with the prefectural chapter of LDP coalition partner New Komeito, which has been seeking an out-of-prefecture solution.

Shimabukuro, who accepted the relocation plan during his tenure as mayor, declared at an Oct. 30 press conference that he would green-light the base's move to Henoko to « eliminate the sense of stagnation prevailing in Nago, » suggesting that the relocation would contribute to the city's development. He also stated that the campaign issues should be clarified — a barb aimed at Suematsu's non-committal stance.

Apparently baffled by Shimabukuro's declaration, the central government and the LDP are seeking to discourage him from running in the race for fear a three-way contest would give Mayor Inamine the advantage.

« The relocation issue would become a major campaign issue and would affect the strategy of the

Suematsu camp, » said a senior LDP official. In a telephone conversation on the evening of Oct. 29, LDP Secretary-General Shigeru Ishiba tried in vain to persuade Shimabukuro to refrain from running.

« Shimabukuro has a lot of pride in the leading role he took on the relocation issue » when he was mayor, one source close to the issue stated. « This has all happened because the pro-relocation camp made light of him. »

If the anti-relocation incumbent wins the Nago mayoral race, it would affect Gov. Nakaima's decision on the coastal reclamation plan. The central government is stepping up its efforts to win Nakaima's approval for the project ahead of the Jan. 19 mayoral election, so that the election results would not affect the governor's decision.

On Oct. 30, the central government decided to transfer KC-130 refueling aircraft from Futenma to Iwakuni Air Base in Yamaguchi Prefecture next year.

« There is a consensus among Okinawans that danger must be removed from Futenma. I hope to win Iwakuni's understanding toward efforts to move the issue forward, » Senior Vice Foreign Minister Nobuo Kishi told reporters during a visit to the Iwakuni Municipal Government to seek the city's cooperation.

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<http://mainichi.jp/english/english/newsselect/news/20131031p2a00m0na013000c.html>

Okinawa : LDP assemblyman backed by pro base-relocation group to run for Nago mayor

NAGO, Okinawa — A prefectural assemblyman backed by a group in favor of the relocation of U.S. Marine Corps Air Station Futenma to this city has revealed he will run for mayor here, pitting him against the anti-relocation incumbent in the Jan. 19 election.

Bunshin Suematsu, 65, a member of the Okinawa Prefectural Assembly elected from the city of Nago on the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) ticket, announced his planned mayoral candidacy during an Oct. 24 meeting of his support group. His announcement came following a request from a group of Nago Municipal Assembly members, which conditionally endorses the Futenma base's relocation from the prefectural city of Ginowan to Nago.

As Nago Mayor Susumu Inamine — a staunch opponent of the relocation — announced in May that he would seek re-election, the race is set to be a showdown between pro- and anti-relocation camps. The upcoming mayoral election will be the fifth since Tokyo and Washington reached an agreement in 1996 on the reversion of the Futenma base lands.

In March this year, the central government filed a request with Okinawa Gov. Hirokazu Nakaima to approve the reclamation of a coastal area of the Henoko district of Nago in preparation for the planned relocation.

« I will wait and see if the governor will approve the request. I will consult with concerned parties

and think about my position regarding the relocation, » Suematsu told reporters on Oct. 24, keeping his own position on the base close to the vest.

Calls have long been mounting in Okinawa Prefecture for the Futenma air base to be relocated outside the prefecture. Suematsu stopped short of clarifying his position after the pro-relocation camp advised him not to draw attention to his own pro-relocation views during the lead up to the election.

In addition, because the LDP's Okinawa prefectural chapter has been advocating the base's relocation outside the prefecture, Suematsu could come under fire if he explicitly endorsed the move to Nago. A senior official with the Okinawa chapter of New Komeito — the LDP's coalition partner in the national government — said, « It is difficult for us to support a candidate in favor of the relocation (to Nago). We might decide whom to support on our own. »

At a press conference on Oct. 24, Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga hailed Suematsu's declaration to run in the Nago mayoral race. However, regarding Suematsu's reticence on the relocation issue, Suga only stated, « Our party will respond to the matter with LDP Secretary General Shigeru Ishiba taking the lead. »

Suga apparently made the remarks as some presume that Gov. Nakaima — who was re-elected in 2010 with the backing of the LDP's Okinawa chapter — could postpone his decision on the land reclamation project until after the mayoral election if the relocation issue takes center stage in the campaign.

« Making the relocation issue a point of contention in the mayoral race has both good and bad aspects, » said one central government official.

Asked if he would back Suematsu, Gov. Nakaima told reporters in Tokyo, « Of course. » However, he didn't say when he would decide on the reclamation plan.

The central government has hammered out a number of local economic stimulus measures to win the governor's approval of the reclamation plan ahead of the Nago race.

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<http://mainichi.jp/english/english/newsselect/news/20131025p2a00m0na015000c.html>
