

Okinawa: Environmentalist fears secrets law could cloud origin of toxins on returned base land

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OKINAWA — An environmentalist here has voiced concerns that a controversial state secrets bill might enable the government to hide the truth behind environmental pollution, such as highly toxic dioxins at the site of a former United States military base in Okinawa that may have originated from Agent Orange defoliant.

“When land is returned, will information on pollution be designated a secret because it ‘deals with diplomacy or defense?’ If that happens, even though pollution affects the health of people and the environment, we won’t be able to look into the issue,” warns Masami Kawamura, director of the Citizens’ Network for Biodiversity in Okinawa, which has investigated the existence of Agent Orange in Okinawa.

The dioxins were found in barrels unearthed from a soccer field here on property that was formerly part of the U.S. military’s Kadena base. The base land was returned to Japan in 1987. All the turf on the field has now been removed. A woman who was cleaning a park nearby noted that the field was often used for matches.

“It’s worrying because there were many children there,” she said.

The barrels were uncovered when field’s turf was being relayed on June 13. The barrels bore the name of the Dow Chemical Company, which made Agent Orange used in the Vietnam War. A total of 26 barrels have been uncovered. Agent Orange is said to have caused many deformities in children born in areas where it was used. The defoliant’s dioxins are considered to be the main cause.

According to the Okinawa Defense Bureau, the land where the barrels were found was created by filling in a valley, and the barrels may have been dumped there before the work commenced.

Both the bureau and the Okinawa Municipal Government investigated the barrels and found dioxin levels in excess of the national environmental limit. However, while the city government listed Agent Orange as a possible cause of the dioxins, the defense bureau was more reserved, saying that the dioxins could have come from weed killers.

While former U.S. soldiers and others have said in the past that Agent Orange was brought onto Okinawan soil, neither the U.S. nor Japanese governments have acknowledged it.

“It is revolutionary that the city conducted its own investigation at a time when the national government was possibly trying to play down the situation,” says Kawamura.

Minister of Defense Itsunori Onodera visited the field in September and said to Okinawa Mayor Mitsuko Tomon, “We’d like to return the land to its former state in a transparent manner.” The Defense Ministry began magnetic surveying and other follow-up investigations of the site, while the Okinawa Municipal Government plans further investigations of its own.

In the meantime, Kawamura is worried where the special state secrets protection bill is headed. The bill lists four areas in which documents can be designated secret: defense, diplomacy, prevention of specific damaging activities (espionage, etc.), and prevention of terrorism.

In April, the Abe administration reached an agreement with the United States on the return of six U.S. military facilities and areas south of Kadena Air Base. However, the Japan-U.S. Status of Forces Agreement exempts the U.S. from any responsibility to restore returned land to its former state or to pay money for doing so. Japan pays for pollution removal and other such costs.

Daisuke Misawa, head of the Okinawa Defense Bureau section handling the U.S. return of land to Japan, says, "We are not planning on making such reports secret," but Kawamura remains unsettled.

"I don't want to oppose the central government, but I want information to be shared so we can move in the right direction, and I think the special state secrets protection bill discourages that," says Kawamura.

P.S.

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