

Okinanawa: Thousands protest at US bases after Japanese woman's murder

Sunday 19 June 2016, by [McCURRY Justin](#) (Date first published: 19 June 2016).

Protest marks new low for US and Japanese relations over Okinawa with threats to have US air station moved to another part of the island.

Tens of thousands of people on the Japanese island of Okinawa have taken part in one of the biggest protests against US military bases in recent years, weeks after the arrest of an American base worker in connection with the murder of a 20-year-old local woman.

The protesters, many of whom wore black, braved scorching heat to call for an end to the island's role as host to more than half the 47,000 US troops in Japan.

Organisers claimed 65,000 people joined the demonstration at a park in the island's capital, Naha, while the police did not give a figure.

The protesters also urged the Japanese and US governments to abandon the controversial relocation of a marine airbase from a crowded city on Okinawa to a more remote coastal location on the island, about 1,000 miles south of Tokyo.

Okinawa's anti-base governor, Takeshi Onaga, told the crowd he regretted being powerless to prevent crimes by US military personnel, two decades after the abduction and rape of a 12-year-old girl by three US servicemen.

That crime prompted mass protests and forced Tokyo and Washington to discuss reductions in the US military footprint on Okinawa, including the relocation of Futenma to a district in the coastal town of Nago, and the transfer of 8,000 marines and their dependents to the US Pacific territory of Guam and other locations.

"We had pledged never to repeat such an incident," Onaga said. "I could do nothing to change the political system to prevent that. That is my utmost regret as a politician and as governor of Okinawa.

"The government ... must understand that Okinawa residents should not suffer any more from the burden of the bases."

While the US military has pointed out that the crime rate among personnel serving in Okinawa is lower than that of the local civilian population, serious crimes by soldiers, marines, sailors and airmen periodically ignite opposition to the US military presence.

Earlier this month, the US navy imposed a Japan-wide drinking ban after an American sailor based on Okinawa was arrested on suspicion of drink-driving and causing an accident in which two people were injured.

The restriction was eased last Friday, permitting sailors to drink alcohol on base until 10pm and in

their homes if they live off base. The ban on drinking in civilian bars and restaurants remains in place, the US navy said in a statement.

Under its conservative prime minister, Shinzo Abe, Japan has established closer security ties with the US, with Okinawa regarded as a key geopolitical asset as the allies struggle to respond to Chinese naval activity in the South China Sea and the East China Sea, where Beijing and Tokyo have competing claims to the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands.

US officials insist that a military presence on Okinawa is of vital strategic value in the face of an increasingly assertive China and a nuclear-armed North Korea.

Kenneth Franklin Shinzato, a former marine who worked as a civilian contractor at the US air force's Kadena airbase, has reportedly confessed to raping and killing Rina Shimabukuro in April, although he has so far been arrested only on suspicion of abandoning her body.

One protester carried a banner that said: "Murderer Marines. Out of Okinawa", while others read: "Our anger is past its limit" and "Pull out the Marines."

Chihiro Uchimura, 71, said she was filled with sadness at Shimabukuro's death. "As long as there are US military bases this kind of incident will continue to happen," she said.

While both governments have stressed the importance of bilateral security ties, some observers believe the recent crimes and the insistence on pushing ahead with the Futenma relocation will only strengthen the resolve of Okinawan residents.

"I think they just feel so frustrated," said Jeff Kingston, a professor of Asian history at Temple University in Tokyo. "These protests are not just going to go away."

Noboru Kitano, a teacher, described Japan as a "military colony of the United States," symbolised by the Futenma base.

Okinawa was the scene of one of the bloodiest battles of the Pacific war, and remained under American occupation until 1972. About a fifth of the island is still under US military control.

In an attempt to quell local anger, Washington is reportedly considering returning a 10,000 acre (40.5 sq km) tract of jungle early next year, which would be the biggest return of land since the 1972 reversion.

Justin McCurry in Tokyo and agencies

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* "Thousands protest at US bases on Okinawa after Japanese woman's murder". The Guardian. Sunday 19 June 2016 13.58 BST Last modified on Sunday 19 June 2016 14.47 BST :