

A Sharpened Confrontation with the Tokyo Government Features Okinawa in 2007

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Anti-base Struggle

The struggle against U.S. military bases is entering another intense phase as the Japanese government has launched aggressive action to build a large U.S. base in Nago City, northern Okinawa. The United States has been eager to establish a new base in Okinawa putatively as a substitute military facility to Futenma U.S. airbase, an outdated base located in the midst of Ginowan city, which anyway had to be closed for technical and political reasons. The original plan agreed on in 1996 was to construct a base off the coast of Henoko, Nago City. But that project met with persistent and tough resistance of the Okinawa people and was slow to progress. The resistance compelled the Japanese and U.S. governments to abandon their initial plan and to shift to a new plan which was agreed on at the Japan-U.S. Security Consultative Committee in 2006. The newly designated location of the base covers Oura Bay, a part of Henoko cape, and U.S. military Camp Shwab, and the base is to have two runways set in a V shape as well as other facilities. This plan is called a coastal plan as distinct from the defunct offshore plan.

At the moment, Okinawa Governor Nakaima Hirokazu and Nago City Mayor Shimabukuro Yoshikazu take the position that they do not accept the coastal plan on the grounds that the designated area is too close to residential areas. However, since neither of them is against relocating the Futenma base somewhere in Okinawa, they are only asking for the location of the projected base to be moved by a few hundred meters..

Governor Nakaima accepted with little resistance an application filed by the Defense Facilities Administration Naha Bureau for the execution of what they called a "preliminary survey" of marine life for the purpose of investigating the impact of a military base sitting on corals and dugongs living in the sea area. While regular environmental assessment requires long official procedures, the DFANB has skipped necessary steps and forced the survey on no legal ground. This signaled an extra-legal start of the base construction.

This aggressive act of the government has aroused strong anger among the people in Okinawa. Peace and anti-base people immediately stood up organizing another mass-movement to stop the remodelled base construction plan. This is the third wave of their struggle over the Nago-Henoko base. The first was the Nago citizen's referendum in 1997 that demonstrated their rejection of the base, the second the 2004-2005 struggle involving daily sit-ins and sea battles that aborted the original offshore base plan.

In the current phase, Okinawa people and supporters from all over Japan have again gathered at Henoko Beach. While some held sit-ins, others went into the sea on boats and canoes to stop the survey operation. Some of the protestors were divers who dived to prevent survey equipment from being set at the bottom of the sea.

Faced by this strong resistance, the government behaved tougher than before. The Japan Coast Guard, having cast off its facade of neutrality, openly sided with DFANB-hired divers and other operatives. Furthermore, the Japanese government dispatched the Japan Maritime Self-Defence Force minesweeper Bungo to the Henoko sea area obviously to intimidate the protestors. It was also reported that JMSDF divers were directly involved in the placement of survey materials on the seabed. Violence wielded against protesting divers was reported frequently. On July 21, Taira Natsume, the best known leader of the struggle, felt his arms locked in a full nelson while he was covering a survey facility with his body at the bottom of the sea to prevent contract divers from working on it. He felt unable to breathe, managed to slip away from his attacker, and burst to the surface. Then he shuddered finding the air valve had been shut off. There is a strong suspicion that it was done on purpose. "They seem to have crossed the line," Taira told Ryukyu Shinpo, the Okinawa local newspaper.

Simultaneous with the new military base construction in Henoko, the Japanese government is undertaking new U.S. military helipads construction in Takae, in Higashi village, northern Okinawa. Protest actions are organized against this project too but it is not easy for the Okinawa movement to organize simultaneous action over both Henoko and Takae projects.

Anger against Tokyo's Falsification of School Textbooks

The bases are not the only issue that calls for the Okinawa people's legitimate anger. It is the Tokyo government censors' intervention in high school text books that has met with categorical refusal by all quarters of Okinawa society.

Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology in Tokyo on March 30, 2007 told the media that it had instructed textbook publishers to change the descriptions in high school textbooks about the Japanese Imperial Army's coercion of Okinawa civilians into committing mass suicide during the last days of the Battle of Okinawa. In this fierce battle a quarter of Okinawa's civilians lost their lives. During the battle, Okinawan citizens were directly or indirectly coerced by the Japanese Army to kill themselves rather than survive and surrender to the U.S. military. The Tokyo censors ordered the mention of "the Japanese army" dropped as the body that caused mass suicides.

In Okinawa, both conservatives and liberals strongly opposed the history text rewriting. Okinawa Prefectural Assembly unanimously passed twice a resolution demanding that the Japanese government repeal the MECSST instruction. Moreover, all the 41 municipalities in Okinawa passed similar resolutions. On June 9, 3500 people gathered in a prefecture-wide gathering against the history falsification. Another gathering is planned to be held in September 2007 and the Okinawa governor is attending it.

The Okinawa people have reasons to be seriously concerned with this act of rewriting history to exonerate the Imperial Army, afraid that the new Japanese army, the "Self-Defence Force," may direct their weapons toward them. The dispatch of the navy warship for the Henoko operation may show this fear is not far-fetched.

Victories in Upper House Election

The pent up anger of the Okinawa people found its explosive expressions in the Upper House

election held on July 29, 2007. Two progressive candidates won, and one of them achieved an overwhelming victory defeating the Liberal Democratic rival. Itokazu Keiko, supported by a coalition of all opposition parties, defeated the LDP incumbent Nishime Junshiro by garnering over 370,000 votes against 250,000 for Nishime. Also, veteran peace fighter Yamauchi Tokushin was elected in the proportional representation constituency. When Yamauchi was mayor of Yomitan village in Okinawa, he succeeded in taking a part of the U.S. military base there back to the village, and currently he is a strong supporter of the Henoko struggle.

The victory in the Upper House election has brightened the Okinawa progressive people's perspective for the future given the fact that in the past few years the progressive candidates have suffered successive defeats. Itokazu herself, who contested the gubernatorial election in November 2006 lost to Nakaima Hirokazu backed by the ruling coalition.

There are indications that despite all difficulties, the tide has reversed in Okinawa.

P.S.

* From Japonesia Review, People's Plan Japonesia website.

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