

# Okinawa: Effects of long-term US Military presence

## HISTORY OF U.S. MILITARY PRESENCE

Okinawa consists of a group of islands that make up the southern-most prefecture in Japan. It is situated midway between Tokyo and Manila, and called the “keystone of the Pacific” by military planners because of its strategic location.<sup>1</sup> It was the site of three-months of fierce fighting between Japan and the U.S. in 1945. Approximately 200,000 Okinawans were killed in this Battle of Okinawa, both by U.S. and Japanese troops. At the end of the war, the U.S. took over the administration of the Okinawa islands. Later, the 1951 San Francisco Peace Treaty officially placed Okinawa under U.S. military administration until 1972 when Okinawa’s administration reverted to Japan.<sup>2</sup> Immediately after the war, Okinawan civilians, displaced by the terrible Battle, were placed in POW camps while the military claimed land for bases. Some of the most productive land, used for farming and sustaining people’s livelihood, was requisitioned for U.S. military use. In historically populated areas in the central and southern part of Okinawa island, the rebuilt towns were squeezed around the bases.

Even after reversion to Japan in 1972, most of the U.S. bases remained in Okinawa. Seventy-five percent of the U.S. military facilities in Japan are located in Okinawa, although Okinawa is only 0.6% of the land area of Japan. There are 37 U.S. bases and military installations in Okinawa, 23,842 troops and 21,512 family members.<sup>3</sup> The Prefecture has over 1.3 million people. It is twice the size of Guam but smaller than Oahu (Hawai’i).

Although Okinawa is now a part of Japan, many Okinawans are bitter about Japanese domination and ethnocentrism. Following the “quasi-colonization” by a southern Japanese Satsuma, the newly developed Japanese nation annexed Okinawa, formerly an independent kingdom with its own distinctive language and culture, in 1879.<sup>4</sup> Many people oppose U.S. military operations in Okinawa, and resent the fact that Japan allowed Okinawa to be placed under U.S. occupation until 1972, twenty-five years later than the rest of Japan, and that the “burden” of the U.S.-Japan Security Alliance falls so heavily on Okinawans.

## NEGATIVE EFFECTS OF US BASES ON OKINAWAN PEOPLE

### **Military Prostitution and Violence Against Women and Children**

In the past, as many as one in thirty Okinawan women were employed as prostituted women for the U.S. military in “A sign” bars.<sup>5</sup> Entertainment districts were built

close to military bases immediately after the war. In some cases U.S. military authorities returned land taken for bases to Okinawan planners for purposes of building entertainment areas.<sup>6</sup> In 1969, at the height of the U.S. War against Vietnam, the Okinawan police estimated that 7,362 Okinawan women were working in prostitution though others estimated this number to be 10,000 or more. Before reversion in 1972, the discussion of an anti-prostitution law was brought up in the Okinawan government assembly on two separate occasions, but nothing was done because of the large economic benefit contributed by these women—larger than the agricultural industry (pineapple and sugarcane combined).<sup>7</sup> The women were coerced into prostitution through economic hardship, given the lack of meaningful alternatives. Although counted as part of the underground economy, their wages made a significant contribution to the Okinawan economy.

Today, some 7,000 Filipinas (and the number may be much higher), whose home economy is far weaker than that of Japan, are the prostituted women—on entertainment visas—for U.S. military personnel in Okinawa, even though prostitution is illegal in Japan.<sup>8</sup>

On September 4, 1995, a 12-year-old girl was returning home at 8:30pm after shopping in a neighborhood store near a U.S. military base. Abducted by three U.S. servicemen in a car, her hands, eyes, and mouth bound with duct tape, she was raped, dumped out of the car, and left by the side of a road. Her assailants—two Marines and a sailor—had rented the car inside the base, purchased duct tape and condoms, and left the base with the purpose of abducting a woman and raping her.

This incident was one more in a long history of violence against women that has continued in Okinawa throughout the postwar period. However, there were several things different about this case that resulted in a massive outpouring of grief and anger by Okinawan citizens:

- 1) The victim pressed charges;
- 2) The rape occurred during the Fourth UN Conference on Women in Beijing where violence against women was declared a human rights violation—this inspired confidence in Okinawan women, especially the large contingent that attended the UN Conference;
- 3) The rape occurred during the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary year of the end of World War II, a time of reflection on 50 years of U.S. military presence in Okinawa; and
- 4) The age of the victim made it very clear that such violence claims victims without distinction.<sup>9</sup>

The rape of this girl was reported worldwide, but most crimes by U.S. troops (including rape, assault, and murder) are not. Official reports estimate more than 5,394 military crimes against Okinawan people from 1972 to 2005, with 533 of them heinous crimes (1972-2004). Arrested military personnel suspected of committing these crimes numbered 678.<sup>10</sup> These crime figures are a conservative estimate as many crimes are not reported, perhaps especially violence against women. The bases are also associated with drug use and the spread of HIV/AIDS. Mixed-race Amerasian children fathered by U.S. troops have often been abandoned by their fathers and experience discrimination from local people.

### **Distorted Local Economies and Land Use**

Okinawa is the poorest prefecture in Japan, with unemployment twice the rate of the rest of the country. Tourism and agriculture dominate the economy. U.S. bases take up 20% of the land area—land that could be used more productively to benefit local people. U.S. troops live in spacious, fenced-off enclaves—some with golf courses and swimming pools—in marked contrast to the close-packed cities nearby. Kin, a small, old town of 10,000, for example, is squeezed between Camp Hansen, which houses 5,000 Marines, and the sea. The city of Ginowan has been built around the sprawling Futenma Marine Corps Air Station, one of the largest airfields in Asia. Local people cannot enter the bases. Traveling around them adds miles to everyday trips.

In communities near the bases, employment is skewed towards servicing the military—in stores, car repair businesses, restaurants, bars, and prostitution. In addition, 8,813 local people work on the bases (as of 2004). However, the Okinawan economy is less dependent on the U.S. military than formerly. Rents and income from base-related activities now make up about 5% of the economy compared to 15 % in 1972. Some landowners have been more than willing to let their land to the U.S. military, and have earned regular income from these rents. Others, especially the “Anti-War Landowners,” always opposed the enforced appropriation of their family’s land. Still, owners with land used for bases are only 34,000, or 2.6% of the total population of Okinawa.

The Japanese government pays approximately \$100,000 per year for each member of the U.S. military stationed in Japan. It pays for electricity on the bases, and highway tolls for U.S. military personnel. Japanese tax money supports shopping centers, schools, libraries, and churches on the bases (even though the Japanese constitution separates church and state). More than 70% of the total cost of U.S. bases in Japan is borne by Japan.

Economic concerns were central in the Okinawa Governor's election of November 1998. The emphasis was on the relative weakness of the Okinawan economy rather than the fact that the Japanese economy is generally in decline. The incumbent, Governor Ota, who consistently opposed the presence of U.S. bases, lost his bid for a third term to a pro-business candidate, Keiichi Inamine, backed by the central government in Tokyo. In 1998, the Okinawan unemployment rate was high— 7.7% (and almost twice as high for people under 30). This was twice the average for other prefectures in Japan, and has remained high. In 2005 it was 7.9%.<sup>1 1</sup> For many voters, Inamine's promise to improve the Okinawan economy seemed to be the deciding factor in the closely-contested election. In 1999, the Japanese government decided to build an offshore runway for U.S. military use. The plan was to replace Futenma Air Station with a new heliport in Henoko, Nago city (northern Okinawa). Accordingly, the Japanese government provided an economic "reward" fund of \$850 million over 10 years to develop the northern area of Okinawa—the usual Japanese government method to keep the matter quiet. The other economic "reward" was to bring the 2000 G8 Summit to Okinawa, not a typical or ideal place to hold such a security-heavy event. In November 2006, upon Inamine's retirement, one of the co-chairs of Okinawa Women Act Against Military Violence, Keiko Itokazu, ran for the governor's position but was not successful.

### **Environmental Contamination**

Highly carcinogenic materials (fuels, oils, solvents and heavy metals) are regularly released during military operations, affecting the land, water, air, and ocean, as well as people's health.

Okinawan people suffer deafening noise from low-flying military aircraft. In other parts of Japan, U.S. planes cannot leave or land after 7pm. At Kadena Air Force Base in Okinawa, they can leave or land any time, and generate severe noise. Students in schools near the bases often have classes disrupted due to noise, and suffer from poor concentrations.<sup>1 2</sup>

Speaking to students and faculty at American University in October 1998, Mie Kunimasa said,

I come from Ginowan City. My house is located 80 feet from the fence of the military base. Everyday is very noisy—day and night—without a break...Futenma Air Base is located in the middle of a very congested residential area. Sometime when I'm driving, I see very dark things flying in the sky. I fear that a jet might crash at any moment.<sup>1 3</sup>

She then played a tape of aircraft noise recorded in her house near Futenma, and amplified it through the microphone. The noise was so loud that no one could hear her next words, but she went on speaking to show how everyday conversations and school classes are continually disrupted.

On August 23, 2004, a U.S. Marine CH-53D Sea Stallion (a heavy assault transport helicopter) went out of control and crashed into the administration building at Okinawa International University. Immediately after the crash, U.S. Marines occupied a large section of the campus and the public road running alongside the damaged building, allowing no one—not even the police or university officials to enter the site. Some debris flew into surrounding homes as far as 300 meters (984 feet) from the site. Just 100 meters (328 feet) away was a gas station, and 150 meters away an elementary school and day-care center. Miraculously no was killed or injured. The U.S. Naval hospital initially reported that the pilot was in critical condition but the U.S. military did not release further information concerning the pilot or two other service members who were supposedly involved in the accident.

Regular training exercises using live ammunition have caused forest fires, soil erosion, earth tremors, and accidents. In 1996, U.S. Marines fired depleted uranium shells into the ocean. The U.S. military defines this as a conventional weapon, but, officially, they are not allowed to fire depleted uranium in Japan. White Beach, a docking area in Okinawa for U.S. nuclear submarines, is an area where regional health statistics show comparatively high rates of leukemia in children and cancers in adults. In 1998, for example, two women from the White Beach area who had been in the habit of gathering shellfish and seaweed there died of liver cancer. Also local people are affected, sometimes killed, in traffic accidents caused by U.S. troops. In October 1998, for example, a U.S. Marine killed a young woman in a hit-and-run accident.

Under the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA, Article 4), the U.S. is not responsible for environmental clean-up of land or water. As in Korea and the Philippines, host communities do not have adequate information on the extent of military contamination. The Japanese government does not release information about it. After the incident with the depleted uranium shells mentioned above, the U.S. government must inform local officials about military operations, but Okinawan people doubt that this is really working.

After years of complaints from host communities about live-firing drills, the Japanese government arranged for them to be transferred from Okinawa to four sites in mainland Japan, at Yausubetsu (Hokkaido), Kita-Fuji and Higashi-Fuji (near Mt. Fuji), and Yufuin (Oita Prefecture, Kyushu). Besides damage to the land, and fires caused

by these drills, another environmental hazard is the unexploded ammunition left at the sites. The Okinawa prefecture has had to pay for this to be cleaned up in the past. Now the military are seeding the bare hillsides from helicopters. The hills look green but local people are concerned about safety. Once the old firing ranges have been seeded it will be impossible to see the unexploded ordnance.

### **Treaties and Agreements**

The Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) provides for the behavior of U.S. troops stationed in Japan. U.S. military personnel often flout local law and custom, and are shielded from the Japanese judicial system unless U.S. military authorities agree to co-operate with local police. In many cases, U.S. troops who commit crimes against local people are disciplined, if at all, by U.S. military authorities. Military personnel who have injured or, in some cases, killed local people through negligent driving have not been brought to trial in local courts. This incenses local people who see it as a daily manifestation of U.S. insensitivity and high-handedness. They are pressing for changes in the SOFA to give more protection to host communities. In the case of the 12-year-old Okinawan girl who was raped, the U.S. military handed over the three men responsible to Okinawan civilian authorities in view of the enormous outcry this incident generated in Okinawa and internationally. The young men stood trial in a Japanese court, were found guilty, and have served seven-year, and six-and-a-half-year sentences in prison in Japan.

On November 4, 1995, the Okinawa Prefecture Government submitted a petition to the Japanese government for the revision of the U.S.-Japan SOFA “to ensure both the stability of Okinawan lives and regional development.”<sup>1 4</sup> It listed 10 main points: the return of land needed by local municipalities, reducing noise pollution, penalizing military units responsible for accidents, banning U.S. military aircraft from civilian airports, allowing local government officials to enter U.S. bases, banning marching in civilian areas, installing recognizable license plates on U.S. military vehicles, taking crime suspects into Japanese custody, compensating victims of crime or accidents, and allowing local municipalities to participate in discussion of the U.S.-Japan Joint Committee.

In addition to petitioning the Japanese government regarding the undue “burden” placed on Okinawa as a result of the concentration of U.S. military installations, Okinawan governors made eight official visits to the United States in a decade (1988-1998)—two by Governor Nishime and six by Governor Ota—to seek reduction of bases in Okinawa and resolution of the many base-related problems.

These petitions and visits resulted in live-ammunition drills being moved to sites in mainland Japan, and some small changes in day-to-day military operations in Okinawa.

### **Base Conversion/Economic Development**

Under Governor Ota (1990-1998) the Okinawa Prefecture developed a plan for phasing out the U.S. bases by the year 2015. The centerpiece of this plan was to be a new Cosmopolitan City, a “grand design for a new Okinawa aiming at the 21<sup>st</sup> century” with underlying principles of peace, coexistence and self-sufficiency.<sup>1 5</sup> The idea was to make use of Okinawa’s “geographical location, natural environment, and historical experiences to expand on international exchanges and build trusting ties with foreign countries, especially the Asian countries, not only through economy but through science, culture, and training programs for personnel.”<sup>1 6</sup> The emphasis would be on greater economic independence for Okinawa, the use of information technology, restoration of the natural environment, sustainable development, and the establishment of research institutes including a center for peace education and research. The planned and phased return of land currently used by the U.S. military was an essential element in this overall concept. After Inamine took over the Governor’s position, this plan disappeared, following pressures from the Japanese government. However, thinking continues about an important peaceful role in Asia for Okinawa, using its central position, as the prefecture is pursuing IT industries to locate in Okinawa.

One strand of this development debate is that Okinawa should achieve economic parity with the mainland. The post-war development of Japan has entailed massive industrialization, destruction of forests, contamination of land and water, and a “salaryman” culture. Some Okinawan environmentalists and women activists oppose this type of development as inherently unsustainable. They argue that the U.S. military should allocate funds for the base-conversion process, including environmental cleanup. Jobs, education, and training must be provided for people now dependent on the bases. Sustainable development must take priority over multinational corporations or tourism. Local people should control planning and decision-making for conversion.

### **OPPOSITION TO U.S. MILITARY OPERATIONS IN OKINAWA**

There is a strong anti-militarist tradition among Okinawan people that goes back many generations. The Ryukyu kingdom (as Okinawa was called) was involved in trade from the 13<sup>th</sup> century. There was a spirit of openness to outsiders, and a rejection of military attitudes as antithetical to making connection with others. This long-standing anti-militarist perspective was reinforced by the devastation experienced by Okinawans

during the Battle of Okinawa in 1945.

The continued presence of the U.S. bases is challenged by anti-war landlords, organized labor, religious groups, women's organizations, and political organizations, with increasing demands for self-determination over the past few years. The abduction and a rape of the 12-year-old girl, mentioned above, revitalized popular opposition to the U.S. bases. In October 1996, a year after this incident, a majority of voters opposed U.S. bases in a Prefecture-wide referendum.

Under the Special Action Committee on Okinawa (SACO) there is a US.-Japan proposal to return 20% of the land used for U.S. bases to local control, including the Futenma Marine Corps Air Station. However, both governments proposed its replacement by a "floating heliport" off the coast of Henoko, Nago. The heliport construction would destroy an area of coral reef and sea grass that is the habitat of the Okinawan manatee (*dugong*), a rare variety of seacow. They are an endangered species, particularly susceptible to sound. Despite strong pressure from Tokyo, local people voted against the heliport proposal in a (non-binding) referendum in Nago, December 1997. Governor Ota also opposed it, and earned great disfavor with Tokyo officials who cut off promised funding for development as a result. Governor Inamine accepted the idea of a joint commercial-military airfield in the north of Okinawa, considered a compromise proposal. Since he was elected, over 35 anti-bases and environmental groups joined together in an anti-heliport association called the Anti-Relocation Association. The heliport proposal met with strong protests by Okinawans as well as mainland Japanese supporters for nearly a decade. The protest became especially difficult when the government started to build towers in the ocean for test drilling. People took to the ocean in small boats and kayaks to obstruct construction. Others maintained a daily vigil on the beach for over a year. Protestors succeeded in defeating the heliport plan, but Tokyo then proposed constructing a new runway by the coast on land that is part of Camp Schwab. Japanese officials claim that this will create less environmental damage than the original offshore plan, but that is doubtful as it means building into the ocean well beyond the current coastline. Besides, this proposal will still cause noise pollution. Local residents, especially from Ginoza village next to Henoko, will be directly affected by over-flying and they have been at the center of strong protest in addition to the protest already going on in Henoko area.

Okinawa Women Act Against Military Violence noted that SACO announces no downsizing of military forces.<sup>17</sup> Rather, they argue that because facilities will be moved to other locations, the SACO proposals represent a modernization and build-up of U.S. military facilities in Okinawa and mainland Japan.



Anti-militarist organizations also oppose the ‘New Defense Guidelines,’ which involve the Japanese government’s total cooperation in U.S. military activities, including the possible use of civilian airports, ports, highways, communication facilities and hospitals throughout Japan, as needed.

In Spring 2006, the Japanese and U.S. governments finalized a plan to relocate 8,000 Marines from Okinawa to Guam. Japanese government officials boasted that this is more than half the 12,000 Marines currently stationed in Okinawa. However, new data show that the U.S. plan to increase the number of Marines in Asia, so 10,000 Marines will stay in Okinawa and 8,000 will be based in Guam—an increase of 6,000 overall, and only 2,000 fewer in Okinawa.<sup>1 8</sup> The U.S. government demanded that the Japanese government pay for all relocation expenses including construction of new facilities in Guam. The Japanese government has agreed to pay \$26 billion for this.

### **CURRENT CAMPAIGNS**

- Protest against the construction of new runways in the Henoko area and new construction of any military facilities. Demands for “No Relocation” of military facilities, installations, or training within Okinawa or in other parts of the world.
- Demands for changes in the Status of Forces Agreement so that U.S. troops can be held accountable by local people and can be prosecuted by local laws if they commit crimes against Okinawan people. Demands that the U.S. military take responsibility for environmental cleanup.
- Demands for the withdrawal of U.S. Marines—not their removal to another location.
- Support for women who sexually service U.S. troops, and opposition to all violence against women and girls committed by U.S. troops.
- Seeking information on environmental contamination of land water, and the ocean as a result of U.S. military activities.
- Discussion of alternative plans for base lands that are due to be returned to Okinawan control, and opposition to the re-location of Futenma Marine Corps Air Station.

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<sup>1</sup> This article is based on reports to the East Asia-US Women’s Network Against Militarism prepared by Okinawa Women Act Against Military Violence, May 1997 and October 1998, updated by Yoko Fukumura in 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Article 3 stated that “as the sole administering authority, Nansei Shoto south of 29 deg. north (including the Ryukyu Islands and the Daito Islands) ... the United States will have the right to exercise

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all and any powers of administration, legislation and jurisdiction over the territory and inhabitants of these islands, including territorial waters.”

<sup>3</sup> The number of bases and installations are from March 2004, and the numbers for troops and family members are from September 2004 (Okinawa prefecture data).

<sup>4</sup> The modern Japanese nation headed by the Meiji emperor was founded in 1868 replacing the feudal system that had lasted several centuries.

<sup>5</sup> “A” sign stands for “Approved.”

<sup>6</sup> Shinmachi district in Oroku (now part of Naha city) was initially appropriated by the U.S. military. However, after discussion between Okinawan planners and the military authority, an area for entertainment was returned by US authorities.

<sup>7</sup> Prostitution has been illegal in Japan since 1959, and this law was effective in Okinawa as of July 1, 1972, two months after Okinawa became a prefecture of Japan.

<sup>8</sup> The number is based on estimates by Hiroshi Shimabukuro (cited in *Let the Good Times Roll*. Sandra Pollock Sturdevant & Brenda Stoltzfus, The New York Press, 1992. Many Philippine women also work in bars and clubs that cater to Japanese tourists and local Okinawan men.

<sup>9</sup> There are other cases where young girls were assaulted as shown in the list of “U.S. Military Crimes Against women in Okinawa” compiled and published by Okinawa Women Act Against Military Violence.

<sup>10</sup> Okinawa prefecture (1972-2004) and Okinawa police report (1972-2005).

<sup>11</sup> Japan Dept. of General Affairs.

<sup>12</sup> Research Study Committee of Aircraft Noise Influence to Health, *Summary of the Second Interim Report of the Field Study on Public Health around U.S. Bases in Okinawa*, March 1998.

<sup>13</sup> Kay Life Spiritual Center, American University, Washington, D.C., October 9, 1998. Translated by Yoko Fukumura, notes, Gwyn Kirk.

<sup>14</sup> *The Cosmopolitan City Formation Concept*, Okinawa Prefectural Government, November, 1996.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. p.1

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. p.1

<sup>17</sup> Suzuyo Takazato, *The Activities of Okinawa Women Act Against Military Violence: Seeking Human Security for Women and Children*, October 1998, 2.

<sup>18</sup> “Following U.S. Military Transformation from the stand point of U.S.-Japan Security Treaty” *Okinawa Times*, May 14 2006, no. 118