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U.S. Military Parents on Okinawa Demand Truth About Toxic Contamination Near Base Schools 在沖米軍基地内小中学校　保護者近辺の毒物汚染の実情を要求

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Jon Mitchell

On Okinawa, U.S. military service members and their families are demanding answers from the Pentagon about a chemical dumpsite located adjacent to two Department of Defense schools.

Last summer, dangerous levels of dioxin were discovered near Kadena Air Base, but only recently did many Americans stationed on the island learn of the contamination.[1] Parents whose children attend the potentially-poisoned facilities claim base officials failed to inform them of the risks and, for almost six months, they did not investigate whether the pollution extended onto their schools' land.

Now many are accusing the military authorities of endangering their children's health. In addition, a growing number of parents affiliated with the base believe their children's serious illnesses may have been caused by dioxin exposure.

The focus of parents' fears are the playing fields of Bob Hope Primary School and Amelia Earhart Intermediate School, facilities operated by the Department of Defense for the children of U.S. service members. Last June, construction workers unearthed more than 20 chemical barrels on civilian land bordering the schools. Tests in July revealed that the barrels contained high concentrations of dioxin, a substance which can cause cancer, immune system damage and developmental problems in children. Dioxin levels measured 8.4 times the legal limits for soil while water peaked at 280 times safe levels. Tests also revealed levels of arsenic in the soil in excess of safe limits. The land had once belonged to the adjacent Air Base but was returned to civilian usage in 1987.

"Knowing that the base has probably been aware of this situation for many months, I feel very angry. I cannot imagine what could justify their decision to withhold this information from us parents. I believe they were morally and ethically obliged to warn us of the possible threat to our children," said Jannine Myers, the mother of a 10-year old girl attending Amelia Earhart Intermediate School.

Myers first heard about the contamination after reading a letter that appeared in The Japan Times newspaper on December 24 titled "Demand answers about dioxin threat at Okinawa schools." [2]

Angered by the authorities' failure to notify parents and local residents about the possible dangers, Myers created a Facebook group on January 10 named "Bob Hope/AEIS - Protect Our Kids," in the hope of convincing base officials to hold a public meeting and explain what action has been taken. The group currently has more than 800 members.

"If there is a dioxin threat at the schools, it will take an enormous amount of public pressure to a) have the U.S. authorities admit that they are responsible, and b) cause them to clean up this mess and protect our children," Myers said.

Correspondence between Kadena Air Base officials and the Okinawa Defense Bureau (ODB) reveals that the U.S. authorities were aware of the proximity of the school fields to the chemical dumpsite as early as June. Documents detail ODB enquiries to the base immediately following the barrels' discovery. In response to these questions into past usage of the land, Kadena officials replied, "Starting in 1980, the area adjacent to the site was used as baseball fields and playgrounds for a nearby elementary school on Kadena Air Base."

"The moment the knowledge of the barrels being uncovered and the potential for any dioxins to be found were known, every parent of the schools, and every person on Kadena should have been notified. I feel outraged," said Tina Eaton who often takes her 3-year old daughter to play on the schools' fields.

In response to the anger from Eaton and other parents, the base was forced to act.

On January 28, at a hastily-convened meeting, 18th Wing Commander Brigadier General James B. Hecker, admitted to parents that he ought to have informed them of the contamination next to Bob Hope Primary School and Amelia Earhart Intermediate School as soon as he learned of the problem the previous summer.[3] But he reassured his audience of 100 that there were no indications the base itself was polluted and he stated his staff were doing all they could to protect children from any harm.

However, in the days following the meeting, members of the Okinawa Defense Bureau unearthed a further 50 barrels on the adjacent land. Similar to the 33 barrels previously discovered, some of the latest batch bear the logo of the Dow Chemical Company; one was marked "Malathion" - an insecticide - in Japanese katakana script suggesting it may have been used by Okinawan maintenance staff employed by the installation.

Workers handle latest of 83 barrels discovered adjacent to Kadena Air Base in January. Photo by Naoya Kuwae.

Many of the barrels appeared far more intact than those previously unearthed.

On January 31, in response to the latest discovery, which brings the current barrel tally to 83, Japanese Defense Minister Onodera Itsunori told TV reporters that the government would investigate the contents of the barrels and research the factory from which they came. He added that the full details and background of the discovery had not yet been confirmed.

Fears that toxic barrels may also lie beneath the school grounds themselves have been heightened by allegations from retired USAF Major Ronald Thomas. As a teenager in the late 1960s, Thomas lived on the base. He claims that he regularly drove empty barrels to land near where the schools now stand which, at the time, was an unofficial dumpsite.

"They were 55 gallon (208 liter) and, on occasion, 30 gallon (113 liter) drums. You could smell the chemicals and a few were stenciled with "Defoliant" in white with "Property KAB Special Services"", said Thomas.

According to Thomas, some of the drums were buried while others were burned or sold to local Okinawan residents.

Thomas is unsure whether the barrels he transported held Agent Orange - the Vietnam War defoliant manufactured by Dow Chemical and other companies in the 1960s and '70s. More than 250 U.S. veterans claim the substance was sprayed, stored and buried on the island during the Vietnam War.

U.S. military records related to Agent Orange catalogue a herbicide stockpile at Kadena in 1971.[4]

Honda Katsuhisa, the Ehime University scientist tasked by Okinawa City with the examination of the barrels likened the land to contaminated fields in Vietnam where the Pentagon sprayed millions of liters of Agent Orange in the 1960s.

Last year, Washington issued a report denying that Agent Orange was ever present on Okinawa. The report was widely condemned by international experts who said it included a number of serious flaws in both methodology and contents.[5]

More than ten parents whose children developed serious illnesses while living on Okinawa bases have expressed fears that contamination at the two schools may be to blame. Many of the sicknesses from which they are suffering include those known to be caused by dioxin exposure - birth defects, auto-immune disorders and childhood cancers.

Telisha Simmons, who lived on the island between 2011 and 2012, is one of those who worries that her children's ill health may have been caused by base contamination.

"I am disgusted that this information has been kept from us. Not even after my daughter was diagnosed with bone tumors and my son with a brain cyst were we informed," she said.

Simmons' family doctors have been unable to offer an explanation for her children's illnesses. Her son attended Bob Hope Primary School and often played on its fields.

"He went out in all weather conditions and at times was wet, muddy and dirty when getting home. It makes me sick that this has been kept hush-hush," she said.

At the January 24 meeting, the base authorities told parents that all tests for toxins on the schools had come back clear. However many parents questioned whether the 6-inch (15cm) deep soil samples were sufficient to detect contamination. On the nearby civilian land, some of the barrels were buried several metres below the surface.

The Air Base has announced it will conduct further tests on the schools' grounds and it provided a telephone number for parents with sick children to contact.

This is not the first time that Kadena Air Base schools have been the focus of public concern. In 1983, a large quantity of live ammunition was discovered buried beneath the playground of Bob Hope Elementary School.

Under the current U.S.–Japan Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA), the Pentagon is absolved of all responsibility for environmental damage caused by its bases. However, in December, Washington announced that it would soon negotiate a new Environmental Stewardship Pact with Japan to supplement the current SOFA.[6] The Pentagon claimed the deal would improve environmental standards on its installations but skeptics dismissed it as an attempt to placate Okinawans' anger over plans to build a massive new military complex in Nago City.

However, it seems clear that concerns over military pollution on Kadena Air Base has united many on both sides of the fence.

"We need to find out if our kids are at risk. That is the least the U.S. government/military owes us - and owes the people of Okinawa. They do not deserve this lethargic attitude on such a potentially devastating discovery, and neither do we," said U.S. mother, Eaton.

Notes

1. For an account of the discovery of the barrels, see here.

2. The Japan Times letter can be read in full here.

3. The January 24 Kadena Air Base meeting, including Gen. Hecker's full briefing for parents, can be watched online here.

4. For details on this report, see here.

5. For a full exploration of the Pentagon report, see here.

6. See, for example, "Pollution rife on Okinawa's U.S.-returned base land", The Japan Times, December 4, 2014. Available here.

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