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Okinawan Bases, the United States and Environmental Destruction

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The Japanese original of this article is available [here](#).

Introduction

The US global "empire of bases" has been well analyzed by Chalmers Johnson, especially in his *Nemesis: The Last Days of the American Republic*, 2006. The complex of bases in Okinawa, ever since the islands fell into US hands in 1945, were central to the 20th century wars in Asia from Korea and Vietnam to the Gulf and Iraq. Okinawa was (and is) in the poignant position of being passionately anti-war, a lesson driven home by the catastrophe it suffered in 1945, yet forced by the Japanese and US governments to accept war and war preparation as its basic collective *raison d'être*. In that sense, Okinawa may be compared to North Korea, both states whose essence is defined in terms of "Sengun" - priority to the military.

Yet Okinawan civil society has shown astonishing courage, determination and imagination in resisting that design. From 1996 to 2005, it blocked all steps towards construction of the new base that the Government of Japan had promised for the US Marine Corps, eventually forcing that plan to be abandoned. In 2005, the two governments drew up a new plan, but it too has faced such resistance since— challenged in a San Francisco court, rejected by the Okinawan Prefectural Assembly and by Okinawan public opinion, seriously questioned by global nature NGOs – that it seems destined to meet the same fate. Commander of US Pacific Forces, Admiral Timothy Keating, recently acknowledged that the base, scheduled under the 2005 agreement to be completed and handed over to the Marine Corps by 2014, was likely to be delayed by some years; the brutal fact is that it is unlikely ever to be built.

Okinawans currently follow closely the negotiations over a SOFA (Status of Forces Agreement) between US and Iraq authorities, noting that the draft agreement there includes something unprecedented between the US and any other country -- a provision for US forces to be tried in Iraqi courts for any breaches of Iraqi law committed while off base and not engaged on joint US-Iraqi missions. Okinawans wonder why Iraq can insist on provisions that the Japanese government has shown little interest in demanding. They note too that Iraq is insisting on an absolute withdrawal date for all US troops, regardless of conditions on the ground, and wonder when the Government of Japan, more than six decades after the beginning of the occupation by US forces, will adopt a comparable position. [The full text of the SOFA in Japanese and English is available [here](#).]

US bases on the main Okinawan island

The following text discusses the environmental consequences for Okinawa of its long subordination to the American war machine. The bases, which constitute some 20 per cent of the land area of Okinawa island, are known to have accommodated masses of poisonous chemical and even (for some decades) nuclear materials, not to mention conventional explosives, fuels, and heavy war equipment (for well over half a century). Under the Status of Forces Agreement (1960) that governs the US presence in Okinawa, local Okinawan government authorities have no jurisdiction within the bases, and even when some parcels of base land have been returned, or are marked for future return, the US government has no obligation to clean them up. No environmental study has been permitted, although occasional fragments of evidence - such as the discovery reported in *Ryukyu shimpo* on 9 November 2008 of arsenic levels 120 times permitted levels in Yomitan village in the vicinity of a US naval installation returned to Japan in 2006 – suggest that thorough investigation is an urgent priority for the health of the islanders.



Water pollution in a river adjacent to Camp Schwab, Nago

The election for the Prefectural Assembly in June 2008 ended the LDP-Komeito conservative (cooperative with Tokyo on base issues) majority and delivered a majority that soon passed a resolution of unequivocal opposition to the construction of any new base [see [Matsumoto and McCormack](#) in Japan Focus]. Defiantly, the Governor, however, under immense pressure from Tokyo (Tokyo in turn being under immense pressure from Washington)] declared himself a "realist" on the issue, meaning he was ready to allow the construction to go ahead, regardless.

The draft Prefectural Environmental Protection Ordinance discussed in the following paper is part of the struggle between parliament (Prefectural Assembly) and executive (Governor) that has been steadily sharpening since the June election. Very recently, the Assembly took the extraordinary step of voting not to pay for the Governor's projected visit to the US (on the grounds that since the Governor was taking a pro-base position he no longer represented Okinawa). The draft law now under consideration is an attempt to attain some measure of control over base lands in respect of environmental pollution.

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In Okinawa, a draft Prefectural Environmental Protection Ordinance, the first comprehensive revision to be attempted in thirty years, was submitted to the prefectural legislature twice, in June and September 2008, but held over both times to the next session. The issue is a uniquely Okinawan one: what to do about the US bases.

Okinawa has no real manufacturing industries, so the greatest source of pollution is the US bases, yet Japanese pollution regulations do not cover the US military. The national and prefectural governments explain that, since all authority within the bases is vested in the US military under Article VI of the US-Japan Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security Regarding Facilities and Areas and the Status of US Armed Forces in Japan (commonly known just as Status of Forces Agreement, or SOFA, 1960) there would be no point in the Japanese side attempting to extend its jurisdiction by passing laws and regulations, since it would not have the right to prosecute violations and therefore passage of an unenforceable regulation would be meaningless. However, with the reversal of power in the Prefectural Assembly following the June 2008 elections, it is no longer enough just to turn a blind eye to the existence of the bases, as was always done in the past.

The Okinawa Prefecture Environmental Council, asked its views at the time the ordinance was being drafted, submitted its response in June 2006, saying, "As long as the current SOFA remains in effect, there can only be symbolic meaning, no practical consequence, in making the US military the target of direct regulations. However, from the point of view of the seriousness of the problem of the base environment, it is simply impermissible to go on doing nothing, as under the current ordinance. Therefore, on the one hand, we propose extending the scope of the Ordinance as much as is possible, and, on the other hand,

making greater efforts than ever before for revision of SOFA.”

Under the charge of extending the scope of the Ordinance, the council suggested implementation of the following four points:

1. The US military always says that they are “good neighbors”. If so, local bodies where there are bases, and Okinawa prefecture, should be able to appeal to the US military to enter a gentleman’s agreement to be called a “pollution prevention agreement”.
2. It is expected that the land provided to the American military for bases will, sooner or later, be returned to the owners to be used for peaceful purposes. A smooth transition to reuse requires fast purification of the sites and, for that, it is indispensable that the US military provides information on the land use history and presence or absence of soil pollution on various areas in the bases. Therefore, prefectural and local bodies at the time of the conclusion of the above-mentioned agreement can demand of the US the release of information at the time of the return of the land, with preparation in advance of such information.
3. If a pollution incident arises that threatens the lives and health of residents, the prefectural governor and local leaders can directly request permission of US commanders to enter the land and survey the situation. (The US and Japanese governments actually agreed in 1973 to such a right to request to survey by entering the base, but it was 2003, 30 years later, before citizens learned of the existence of this agreement.)
4. In order to overcome present base environmental problems, the prefecture should powerfully rouse public opinion and work toward influencing the US and Japanese governments, supported by public opinion. It is expected that the prefecture will grasp the real situation of environmental problems created by US bases, and report to the prefectural environmental council in the form of a white paper every year (or every other year) to update a wide range of residents through public information channels. Not only should base environmental problems be covered in the White Paper, but principles and measures for dealing with those problems should be clarified.

Of these four points, one to three are matters on which local governments can take action. They do not require the US military to act and therefore do not challenge the present agreement. If, however, public opinion is aroused as suggested in point 4, the situation may arise in which the prefecture and local governments will have to consult with the US military, thus changing their administrative relationship. I wonder whether the reason why the prefecture ignores this and hews to the unrevised ordinance may be its preference for avoiding responsibility for working in unknown realms in which there are no precedents. It is necessary to recognize that the legislature has the responsibility to criticize and encourage administrative officials so that they will work hard for the sake of prefectural residents, going beyond the perspective of majority or minority parties.

Among other activities concerning environmental issues, a group of academics concerned about Okinawa’s bases and administration held two symposiums in December 2007 and July 2008 on the theme “Facing US Military Transformation: a problem for Okinawa’s Central districts.” One thing that was pointed out there was the problem surrounding the “Special Measures Law on Reversion of Military Facilities” (*gunten tokusoho*).

Under the Special Action Committee on Okinawa (SACO) agreement [1996] and the Agreement on Reorganization of US bases in Japan [2005], the return of the American bases to the south of Kadena Base is imminent. Liability for site clean-up under that law, which was passed in 1995, was limited to March 31, 2012. The first problem with this is that it cannot cover cleanup of lands returned at a later date. Furthermore, as is clear from the case of clean-up works in the northern half of Camp Kuwae in Chatan, which was returned to Japan in 2004, even four and a half years — three years covered by the “Special Measures on Reversion of Facilities” law and one and a half years covered by the Special Measures Law on Okinawan Development (*Okinawa shinko tokusoho*) has been nowhere near enough to complete the work. Because this is the situation even in the northern sector of Camp Kuwae, which is considered to have relatively few problems, the passage of a second and improved cleanup law capable of addressing the various problems that have arisen becomes a matter of urgency. The current law was drafted on a non-party basis by national Diet members representing Okinawan constituencies, and the same procedure is necessary again now.

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