

Statement by 109 international intellectuals

海外識者109人声明

The World is Watching: International Scholars, Artists, and Activists Petition to Prevent a New U.S. Military Base in Okinawa

The Okinawan people for twenty consecutive years have made plain their overwhelming opposition to a proposed new U.S. Marine airbase at Henoko, on Oura Bay in the city of Nago. Since our January 2014 statement opposing construction of the planned base, local opposition has grown and intensified. People have rallied by the thousands and repeatedly picketed government offices in Okinawa and on the Japanese mainland. The sit-in tent at the Henoko fishing port is now in its 12th year, and the protest tent at the gate to the planned construction site, which has been a 24/7 action since January 2015, has continued for more than 400 days. Protesters are engaging in non-violent civil disobedience - using sea kayaks on the bay and blocking trucks with their bodies on the land - physically interfering with the construction process. Riot police and members of the Coast Guard have attacked demonstrators, causing serious injuries. Polls in the prefecture record 80% opposition to the base. For their part, the Japanese and US governments remain adamant in their determination to thwart the will of the Okinawan people.

The island prefecture of Okinawa, comprising 0.6 % of the nation's land area and 1% of its population, already bears 74% of U.S. military bases in all of Japan. This burden represents close to 500 times that of the rest of the country. Okinawans understand this as blatant structural discrimination.

Government officials in Tokyo and Washington argue that removing the Futenma Marine Corps Air Station from Ginowan City and constructing a new base at Henoko will reduce the problem of noise pollution and the danger of plane crashes in crowded areas. But the people of Okinawa, including the people of Ginowan, have made clear that they do not consider moving these problems from one part of Okinawa to another as a "solution." Moreover, construction of this airbase would destroy the beautiful, though fragile, environment of Oura Bay, which is Japan's finest remaining coral sea and home of the dugong, a protected species of marine mammal, and other fish and plant life.

In November 2014, Okinawans overwhelmingly elected Takeshi Onaga, running on a platform to prevent construction of the base, as governor. He defeated incumbent governor Hirokazu Nakaima, who, after years of promising to oppose the new base construction, had suddenly signed the landfill permit. Nakaima caved into pressure from Tokyo, directly violating his campaign promise and betraying his constituents.

Governor Onaga, who has repeatedly stated his intention to do "everything in my power" to stop the base, appointed a Third Party Committee, a team of environmental and legal experts to identify legal flaws, if any, of the landfill permit, with the possibility of nullification of the permit in mind.

In July this Committee issued its report, which concluded that the landfill permit - approved by former Governor Nakaima violates Japan's Public Waters Reclamation Law by failing to "sufficiently take into account environmental preservation and disaster prevention" and by failing to meet the criteria for "appropriate and rational use of national land." This accords with common sense: it does not require technical expertise to understand that the claim that you can dump three and a half million truckloads of dirt into a coral garden without causing serious environmental damage is patently absurd. Governor Onaga now has the evidence required to nullify the approval of the landfill permit that allowed Tokyo to proceed with base construction.

The Japanese government has responded by announcing a one-month suspension of construction work, and entered negotiations with the prefecture. However, in another slap in the face to the Okinawan people and their representatives, it insists that it will resume work on the base afterwards, regardless of the outcome of the "negotiations."

Governor Onaga holds the key to preventing this with his authority, backed by the Third-Party Committee report, to nullify the landfill permit approved by former Governor Nakaima. It is likely the Japanese government's fear of such an action that motivated its suspension of work and entrance

into negotiations in hopes of pressuring Governor Onaga to end his opposition by promising huge economic development projects. But such attempts at bribery are an insult to the Okinawan people.

The Third Party Investigation has shown that the landfill permit issued by Governor Nakaima is legally flawed - in a word, illegal. This means that the governor is legally bound to nullify it. Such nullification was expected to come right after the Third Party Committee concluded, but to many Okinawans' surprise, Governor Onaga instead announced a one-month delay of any decision based on the Committee Report.

For Governor Onaga to fail to nullify the permit would make him complicit in an illegal project. Of course, the governor knows this, and he also knows that failure to act decisively would also probably trigger an explosion in Okinawan society.

The Okinawan people have made it absolutely clear that they want and expect the governor to nullify the landfill agreement unconditionally with no compromises and no deals.

We support them in this desire.
The world is watching.

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