The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus
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The Henoko Assessment Does Not Pass
Mar. 04, 2012

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Translated by Gavan McCormack

On 20 February the opinion of the Okinawa Governor on the Henoko Assessment was published. His opinion could be said to be more severe than any in the history of environmental assessment in Japan.

First, in his prefatory remarks to the Opinion, the Governor makes clear his basic political stance that "getting rid of the dangers of the Futenma airfield is an urgent task, and that it is a practical impossibility to go ahead with the plan to move it to Henoko without getting local consent." For the Governor first to offer his opinion not on the environmental impact report but on the project itself is something that would be inconceivable in a conventional assessment.

Following the victory in the 12 February Ginowan City mayoral election of the candidate, Sakima Atsushi, who had once been ready to accept transfer of the Futenma base to Henoko, there may have been a slight hope on the part of the Noda government that, if Governor Nakaima's ruling party candidates could be victorious in the Prefectural Assembly elections in June, the Governor's stance might soften. However, Governor Nakaima made clear in the Prefectural Assembly on 22 June that, whatever the outcome of the June elections, he would not be changing his position from the demand for [relocation] "outside Okinawa." The governments of Japan and the US had agreed on 8 February to separate the transfer of Marines to Guam from the movement of the Futenma base to Henoko, but the Japanese government, still insisting on the Henoko transfer, was thus stymied.

So what did the main text of the Governor's Opinion have to say about the Environmental Impact Assessment? He flatly rejected it, saying it was extremely inadequate theoretically and that it was difficult to accept its conclusion that "there is no particular objection on environmental grounds to carrying out the project." In the Governor's opinion, it would be "impossible, by the environmental protection measures spelled out in the EI, to maintain completely the preservation of people's livelihood and the natural environment in the vicinity of the project works." He found the Henoko assessment to be unsatisfactory. The Governor's opinion of the EIS, one that could be shared by many Okinawans, was that it was near zero in terms of meeting the expectations of the Noda government.

However, the Noda government shows no sign of giving up. In an NHK TV program on the night of 20 February, Foreign Minister Genba Koichiro declared that "to close Futenma without constructing Henoko would be to send a wrong signal to China." Repeating the bankrupt mantra about the deterrence role of the Okinawan marines, he said that he would continue to "politely seek Okinawans' understanding."

Currently, the Noda government is striving to persuade Governor Nakaima to accept the Henoko transfer by offering all sorts of inducements, such as the lump-sum payment of generous prefectural subsidies and the revision of the Status of Forces agreement with the US. It is very special treatment at a time when self-governing bodies throughout the country are under severe financial pressure and when the country is in dire straits over the huge disbursements necessary because of the Great East Japan Disaster [of 11 March 2011].

Much of the media in mainland Japan sings along in chorus with Kevin Maher that "Okinawans are renowned for their trickery and extortion from the Government of Japan" and many Japanese people seem inclined to direct a cold stare at Okinawa. The Mainichi editorial is not necessarily a majority view. Okinawans face a long path forward.

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Mainichi Shimbun Editorial: Gov't urged to show realistic ways to relocate Futenma base

Okinawa Gov. Hirokazu Nakaima's rejection of the national government's environmental assessment on the construction of a substitute facility for U.S. Marine Corps Air Station Futenma in the prefecture has made it far more difficult to carry out the base relocation plan agreed on between Japan and the United States.

Nakaima has submitted to the Defense Ministry his written opinion on the environmental assessment report on the plan to move Futenma base in Ginowan to the Henoko district of Nago, also in Okinawa Prefecture. In his opinion, the governor asserted that environmental protection measures outlined in the assessment cannot protect the living environment for local residents or the natural environment in the area. He then pointed out 175 problems, including its impact on dugong designated as an endangered species and low-frequency noise from vertical takeoff aircraft.

What is notable is that its preamble clearly states that it is impossible to carry out the agreed upon relocation on the grounds that the Nago Municipal Government that is supposed to host the substitute facility is opposed to the plan. It then urges that Futenma base be moved out of Okinawa Prefecture and that its land be returned to its owner saying, "Relocation of the base to another area in Japan is the best way to achieve an early resolution of the issue in a reasonable way.

It is of great significance that the governor's opinion has not only pointed out problems involving the substitute facility's impact on the environment but also included his political decision that the relocation plan is unfeasible.

The governor will submit his opinion on the planned reclamation of the sea as part of the construction of a substitute facility for Futenma base to the central government by March 27. Its contents will undoubtedly be similar to his opinion on the environmental assessment. The government will then complete the procedure for the environmental evaluation after revising the assessment report and publicizing it, laying the groundwork for applying to the Okinawa governor for permission to reclaim the sea off the Henoko district of Nago.

However, the possibility that Gov. Nakaima will change his mind and grant the central government permission for reclamation is extremely slim. In other words, the possibility that Futenma base will permanently remain in Ginowan will increase as long as the national government sticks to its plan.

Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda will visit Okinawa on Feb. 26 and 27 for the first time since he took office to meet with Gov. Nakaima. Noda is expected to apologize for the government's confusion over the plan and a gaffe by the former chief of the Okinawa Defense Bureau, and explain the policy of separating the relocation of Futenma base from the overall realignment of U.S. forces in Japan. He will then ask Okinawa for cooperation in the agreed upon base relocation. However, of greater need is for the prime minister to show specific measures to prevent the base from permanently remaining in Ginowan, which Okinawa is most worried about, and the procedure for relocating the base.

Amid growing concern that Futenma base will permanently remain in Ginowan after the relocation plan was separated from the U.S. forces realignment, Prime Minister Noda has repeatedly expressed his firm determination to prevent this by all means. However, it is obvious that he cannot open the way for achieving this as long as he sticks to the plan to shift the base to Henoko, considering the governor's opinion on the environmental assessment.

We would like to emphasize again that Tokyo and Washington should reconsider the relocation plan in an effort to prevent Futenma base from permanently remaining in its current location.

The national government should pursue the best solution, while keeping in mind that the relocation of Futenma is aimed at eliminating the danger that the base poses to local residents and that the plan to shift the facility to Henoko is extremely difficult to achieve.

(Mainichi Japan) February 22, 2012

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