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Okinawan Leaders Carry Osprey Protest to Tokyo 沖縄の市長、オスプレイ抗議を東京へ
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These are dark days for Okinawa.

Last autumn, the Japanese government ignored a 100,000-person protest on the island and allowed the Pentagon to station a dozen Osprey aircraft at MCAS Futenma.

In December, the recently-reelected Liberal Democrat Party pushed again its plans to construct a new military base over the pristine waters of Henoko Bay.

To top it off last week, the Japanese Defense Minister threatened to fire live (albeit tracer) rounds on Chinese aircraft which continue to buzz the disputed Senkaku islands - 400 km west of Naha, the Okinawan capital.

It was against this drumbeat of resurgent Japanese militarism that more than 140 Okinawan civic representatives made a historic trip to Tokyo on Sunday. This was the first time since Okinawa reverted to Japanese control in 1972 that leaders from each of Okinawa's 41 municipalities have visited the nation's capital - and despite the bitter cold, they were met with a warm reception by 4000 Tokyoites at a rally in Hibiya Park.

After greeting the crowd in the Okinawan language, the leaders switched to Japanese and explained why they'd come - "Mainland Japanese don't understand what is happening on Okinawa". They described the discrimination they feel and their sense of injustice - Okinawa is Japan's poorest prefecture but potential growth is hobbled by the military bases that take 20% of its best land. While the speakers riled at Tokyo's insistence to relocate the Futenma base within the prefecture, their strongest outrage was reserved for the Ospreys.

Tokyo and Washington have repeatedly insisted that the helicopter-hybrids are safe. But few mainland Japanese understand that a litany of U.S. military accidents over the past 60 years has taught Okinawans to distrust such reassurances. These crashes include an F-100 fighter jet that ploughed into Miyamori Elementary School in 1959 killing 17 people, and a helicopter that came down in flames on the campus of Okinawa International University in 2004. News of that latter accident never even made the evening news in Tokyo where the media was too busy fawning over its athletes at the opening day of the Athens Olympics.

Following 45 minutes of speeches and a rallying cry of "Ganbaro!" ("Let's do our best!"), the Okinawan leaders headed a march into the heart of downtown Tokyo. If the warmth of their reception at Hibiya Park had lulled them into a sense of optimism, they were soon brought back to reality on the streets of Tokyo's glitzy Ginza district where the roads were flanked with hundreds of Japanese nationalists waving Rising Sun flags. Ranting that the Okinawans were Chinese stooges, they lunged for the marchers - only to be held back by the police.

Some of the nationalists yelled pro-Osprey slogans; others carried signs stating that only a strong military could protect Okinawa.

The message must have been familiar to the Okinawans - 70 years ago, Japanese nationalists waving Imperial flags had told their grandparents the same thing. The result that time? Okinawa was dragged into one of the bloodiest battles of World War Two in the Pacific- fighting in which almost a third of the island's civilians lost their lives while Japanese and American military casualties were the highest of any battle in the war.

It seems Tokyo has a short memory for these things - which is why the Okinawa delegation's visit proved such a timely reminder not to listen to those keen to bang the drums of war once again.

On the day following the Hibiya demonstration, the Okinawans headed to PM Abe's office to hand over a petition for the removal of the Ospreys and the abandonment of plans to relocate Futenma within the prefecture. The PM gave them 4 minutes of his time - just enough to take the petition - before issuing a cookie-cutter comment that his government would look into ways to lessen the burden of bases on Okinawa. According to those present, the words "Osprey" and "Futenma" never left his mouth.

On February 2, the Japanese PM will visit Okinawa for the first time since taking office in December. In all likelihood, he will receive as frosty a reception as that received by Okinawan delegates to Tokyo this weekend.

Jon Mitchell is a Welsh-born writer based in Japan. In September 2012, Defoliated Island, a TV documentary based upon his research into the usage of Agent Orange on Okinawa, was awarded a commendation for excellence by Japan's National Association of Commercial Broadcasters.

The following is the most recent in a series of petitions by Okinawans against the Osprey deployment. Prime Minister Abe has recently said that he will "do everything in his power to decrease the burden [of the base presence] on Okinawa." He said this, however, just as he agreed to the move of the Futenma base to Henoko and acquiesced to the controversial Osprey deployment with only vague promises to improve the situation. Many in Okinawa are outraged and activists and ordinary Okinawans from all walks of life continue to press for change.

Petition:

The Okinawa Prefectural Citizens' Rally Against Osprey Deployment was held on September 9, 2012 to protest with indignation against the forceful deployment of the aircraft and to call for the withdrawal of the deployment plans. More than 100,000 citizens participated in the rally.

However, the governments of Japan and the United States trampled down the collective will of the people of Okinawa and forcefully deployed Osprey planes on October 1, only less than a month after the rally.

Due to the presence of the U.S. Forces' bases, Okinawa prefecture has been imposed with a multitude of damages related to the military facilities. Looking just at the years since the reversion of Okinawa to Japan in 1972, the number of criminal cases involving U.S. service members, civilians and their family members has reached close to 6,000.

As people of Okinawa have taken every opportunity to explain the situation where incidents, accidents, and noise damage related to the U.S. Forces persist, the Japanese government must be duly aware of the situation. Marine Corps Air Station Futenma, in particular, remains in the middle of a residential area, threatening lives and properties of Okinawan people. The governments of Japan and the United States must be aware that the air station is the most dangerous one in the world.

It is outright discrimination against Okinawans to deploy to the dangerous air station the unsafe Osprey which has had repeated accidents since its development stages and has caused a large number of fatalities. In the continental U.S. and Hawaii, trainings have been suspended after giving consideration to the residents' concern over noise pollution.

Since the deployment in October and November, during these two months, more than 300 flights violating the Japan-U.S. safety agreement have been witnessed during the observation conducted by the prefecture and municipalities. It makes us believe that the agreement has already failed.

Furthermore, it was revealed that the remaining 12 Osprey aircraft in the U.S. Forces' plan will be deployed to the MCAS Futenma by July this year. The special operation transport aircraft CV-22 will also be deployed to Kadena Air Base between 2014 and 2016. Such plans are outrageous.

The Ospreys were deployed to Okinawa in the year the prefecture celebrated its 40th anniversary of the reversion to Japan. We hope for the steady progress of Japan as members of the country, while preserving Okinawa's own history and culture which have been passed on since the time Okinawa was called Ryukyu.

Forty years after the reversion, the U.S. Forces continue to be arrogant as if Okinawa is still under their occupation. Japan's national sovereignty is being challenged.

To Prime Minister Shinzo Abe,

We request you to re-examine the situation of Okinawa and implement measures to realize the united call of its people for alleviation of the burden of hosting the U.S. military bases.

This petition for the below requests is hereby presented by the Executive Committee for the Okinawa Prefectural Citizens' Rally Against Osprey Deployment, Okinawa Prefectural Assembly, municipalities and municipal assemblies.

1. Immediately revoke the deployment of Osprey and call off the deployment of the additional 12 aircraft slated by July this year. Also, immediately withdraw the plan to deploy the special operation transportation aircraft CV-22 Osprey to Kadena Air Base.

2. Close and remove MCAS Futenma, and renounce the plan to relocate it within the prefecture.

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