



Forum Addresses Okinawa's Future

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At the Asia-Pacific Journal (APJ)/Okinawa University co-sponsored forum in Naha on December 19, 2010, the main theme was "Where is Okinawa going?" Speakers at three sessions - environmental, geopolitical, and economic - mixed discussion with nearly 200 participants on goals and ideals while addressing serious contemporary challenges.

Kawamura Masami and Yoshikawa Hideki, leaders of Okinawa BD (Citizens' Network for Biological Diversity in Okinawa), an NGO that fielded the largest representation at the international biodiversity conference in Nagoya (COP10) in October, emphasized civil society engagement to empower Okinawans to resist violations of the environment and human rights as represented by US military base-building projects promoted and subsidized by Japan's government.

Amid rising tension in East Asia, typified by the China-Japan conflict over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, historian Arasaki Moriteru and APJ coordinator Gavan McCormack spoke of the danger of Okinawans getting caught up in the Japanese national narrative of their islands as "inherent territory" of Japan. Arasaki stressed Okinawa's significance as a "space of livelihood" for people in the area's fishing community, while McCormack presented an international vision of Okinawa as a place in the Asia-Pacific notable for its tradition of serving as a peaceful bridge between China, Korea, Japan and insular areas.

Political scientist Shimabukuro Jun pointed out that Okinawa's history of "economic development" has only reinforced its status as a military colony and made it an integral part of the post-war AMPO (US-Japan security treaty) system, in which the US military overrides Japan's peace constitution. Shimabukuro called for a redefined local autonomy and legislation that would provide Okinawa with "regional sovereignty."

Miyagi Yasuhiro, a former Nago assembly member who led the 1997 plebiscite that said "no" to the Henoko base plan, explained that Nago never prospered under the system of subsidies (bribes) from the Japanese government in exchange for hosting military bases. He urged Okinawans to unite in opposing military base expansion, and to engage in new environmentally sound forms of economic and social planning.

The forum unexpectedly took place between two events that symbolize the unceasing pressure from the Japanese and US governments to accept deepening militarization of Okinawa. On December 17 & 18, Japanese Prime Minister Kan Naoto visited Okinawa. Kan abjectly apologized to Okinawa's recently re-elected Governor Nakaima Hirokazu for the failure of the Democratic Party of Japan that controls Japan's central government to honor its pledge to move the Futenma Air Station outside Okinawa. He sought Nakaima's understanding for a May 2010 Japan-US agreement to build a replacement base in Henoko (Nago City). Kan said it was not the "best" plan, but a "better" plan. Nakaima, who was re-elected on a platform of moving Futenma out of Okinawa, replied that all plans to build a replacement base within Okinawa were "bad."

Immediately after the forum on December 22, some 100 members of the Okinawa Defense Bureau (the Okinawan branch of the Japanese Ministry of Defense) arrived in Takae, a village in Yanbaru Forest in Northern Okinawa rich with 4,000 species of wildlife, to re-start construction of new US helipads. The Bureau plans to "relocate" six helipads around Takae in exchange for the US Marine Corps returning half of its massive jungle training facility. The helipad relocation plan, part of the US-Japan SACO agreement reached in 1996, is less well known than the plan to relocate the Futenma base facility to Henoko. But Takae residents and supporters have been protesting the helipad construction plan since 2007 in round-the-clock demonstrations, particularly the planned stationing of the accident-prone V-22 Osprey. On December 23, as if to illustrate the dangers of the new facility, a US helicopter hovered 15 meters above tents sheltering participants in a sit-in, reportedly blowing away the tents and threatening injury to the protesters. Residents have filed a complaint with the Okinawa Defense Bureau.

On January 8, supporters of the Takae protest plan to demonstrate in front of the US Embassy and the Ministry of Defense in Tokyo. See the [Peace Philosophy Centre](#) for information about the demonstration. Also, see "[Voice of Takae](#)," a brochure produced by Takae activists, and a [Foreign Policy In Focus article](#) for more information on what is at stake in Takae.

The struggle of Okinawa's citizenry against the combined state power of Japan and the US will continue in the wake of new pressures from Japan and the US. APJ has produced several reports on the political, economic and social issues that swirl around the frontline US military bases in Okinawa and will post additional reports in the coming weeks.