



## Tokyo Police Crackdown on Okinawa Protestors

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**By David McNeill** -- We've recently covered [here](#) the accelerated construction of six new US heliports in the village of Takae, and a new fence on Henoko beach on Okinawa. This, despite the apparently [more conciliatory tone](#) on base issues in Japan's southernmost prefecture struck last month by US Defence Secretary Robert M. Gates.

As in the past, the sudden change in tactics appears to have been accompanied by heavy-handed police action. Protestors on Okinawa have already complained of police harassment. And this week comes news that two middle-aged activists were arrested ([see YouTube video](#)) about 100 meters from the US Embassy in Tokyo as they tried to approach it with a letter of protest.

According to other activists, when they asked the police the grounds for the arrests, they were told that the reason "would be given later." Witnesses say the march was largely uneventful until the two men were grabbed from the front of the protest group, dragged away to a police van and detained in Akasaka Police Station, without access to lawyers. The police have refused to comment on the case.

That means no chance to ask them if these men were a genuine danger to the cops or the embassy and its staff, or whether this might not be a very old and often successful strategy: nip a potentially troublesome movement in the bud by intimidating it with a couple of more or less random arrests. A similar approach was used during Japan's controversial Self-Defence Force 'humanitarian mission' – [since discredited](#) – in Iraq.

The embassy protestors had already been told to keep banners and placards concealed before running into a phalanx of cops near the embassy. Six people were then reportedly allowed to approach the embassy to hand in the protest letter, which had been prearranged, but the embassy rejected the letter. It's not clear if the two arrested were from among the six or the larger group of protestors. When about 50 people went to Akasaka Police Station to protest the arrest of the two men they were "[kettled](#)" into a small park for nearly three hours.

Japanese police [seldom seem as enthusiastic](#) about cracking down on right-wing violence.

Zainichi Korean activist Daniel Choi, for example, was manhandled and beaten by a group of ultranationalists in Shibuya in December [as he stood](#) along with a sign protesting moves to withdraw public funding from ethnic Korean schools in Japan. Police stood by then arrested Choi, allowing his assaulters to amble on. Choi of course was causing 'trouble,' unlike the ultranationalists who have for years been shouting racist abuse at Korean schools, businesses and consular offices.

On paper, the right to legitimate peaceful protest is respected here. [In reality](#), protests are barely tolerated as long as they don't seriously attempt to bother the status quo. The reaction of the police, their extraordinary powers of detention, and the lack of legal representation for arrestees raises the stakes very high for anyone daring to do anything but watch events unfold on television. The two embassy protestors are being held, without charge, till March 3.

Opponents of the Okinawan construction, including many veteran protestors who have peacefully marched for years, say that the atmosphere surrounding demonstrations has subtly changed in recent weeks. Some believe that the police have been told to get tough, and may even be acting under the orders of the US Embassy. That seems unlikely, particularly since the Japanese authorities have proved themselves more than capable of baring their teeth all on their own, when the occasion calls for it.

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**What's Hot editor's note:** In addition to recent What's Hot postings on Okinawa, a February 25 editorial in the *Okinawa Times* ([Japanese only](#)) takes a look at the struggle of local activists to block construction by the Okinawa Defense Bureau, an arm of Japan's Self Defense forces, of military helipads in the Okinawa village of Takae. The protestors, who feel their concerns about the potential for military flight activity to disrupt Takae's community life and the local environment have gone ignored, are resorting to direct action, such as sitting on bags of road construction gravel. As a consequence, they have faced a violent response from authorities. To protect themselves, they have built bamboo and wire barriers. The *Times* views these events as a form of "jungle warfare" (ジャングル戦) now playing itself out in the bamboo forests near Takae, as powerless but determined people use their bodies and the resources of the forest to defend their island village from military intrusion.