The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus
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Relocation of the US base on Okinawa

by Abe Takahashi

The rape of a twelve year old Okinawan schoolgirl in 1995 by US servicemen touched off an upsurge in anti-US base sentiment and a fierce legal and political contest between then Okinawan Governor Ota Masahide and the Japanese government. Less than six months later, the two governments agreed to return the highly controversial Futenma Marine Corps Air Station in the crowded city of Ginowan. But with the proviso that an alternative base be built within Okinawa prefecture. The announcement of the base relocation plan led to a popular struggle in which local voters resoundingly rejected relocation. In July 2002, however, the US and Japan reached agreement on a final plan for a new base, involving mass land reclamation over a coral reef off the Henoko district of Nago, known to be a feeding ground for the endangered dugong. Okinawan Journalist Abe Takeshi reports on the quagmire of pork-barrel politics involved in securing the base over the opposition of many Okinawans, as industry players large and small race to profit from constructing the new base. Abeï¿½s report, written before the November 17 election for Governor of Okinawa well forecast the re-election of Governor Inamine, who supported the base relocation, over the divided progressive opponents of relocation who could not agree on a single candidate. This article appeared in Shukan Kinyobi, October 25, 2002. Abe Takeshi is an Okinawa Taimusu reporter.

"We never thought he'd swallow the government's plan whole."

Close associates of Nago Mayor Kishimoto Tateo were looking dejected. It was a few days after a master plan had been approved on July 29, 2002 for construction of a base off the coast of Henoko in Nago City to replace the U.S. military airfield at Futenma in Ginowan City.

"The government must have steam-rolled him. He looked exhausted."

The master plan specified that the base would be built by reclaiming land from the ocean. Its method of construction had been a bitter point of contention in a construction industry with deeply vested interests in the project. The contenders, ranging from huge American construction conglomerates to small local Nago contractors, had divided into three camps. After more than three years of feuding behind the scenes, the Japanese government's decision spelled defeat for companies in the two camps that had been pushing, respectively, for construction of a beam-supported landing wharf and a floating pontoon runway. Before convening the latest session of its "Facility Relocation Council" which was to make the final decision on the master plan, the government issued a strict gag order. A Nago City official recalled that "Until now the government always compiled comments from previous meetings and sent us an agenda at least three days before the next scheduled meeting. This is the first time they waited to send it until after the Mayor had arrived in Tokyo. They must have been afraid of leaks."

Those with vested interests in the base were not limited to the construction industry. The governments of Japan and Okinawa Prefecture were in the land reclamation camp, the City of Nago was in the landing wharf camp, and Henoko Village was in the pontoon camp. At every level of government the issue became tightly entangled with business interests as each camp made its play for profits in a continuing three-way deadlock.

But Mayor Kishimoto, who had cooperated in the Japanese government's control of information, now found himself in a most awkward position. The Henoko Village Office, the Nago City Council, and companies in the landing wharf camp, who had all been supporters of the Mayor until now, fiercely opposed adoption of the land reclamation method. "I knew there was opposition, but I never thought it was this strong," the Mayor grumbled.

Waging Hardball Behind Closed Doors

A former member of the student protest movement, Mayor Kishimoto had been welcomed to Nago City Hall as a bearer of hope for reform. He rose through the ranks to section chief and then to deputy mayor, but at some point

during the campaign for mayor four years ago he became a successor in the conservative line of former mayors. Looming in the background of this were the movers and fixers who pull the strings in the politics of Nago and its construction industry. They come from mainland corporations and contractors like Shimizu Construction and Shin-Nihon Steel, and they were leaders in the landing wharf camp. It was thanks to them that Mayor Kishimoto had weathered two elections. And they had manipulated him, claiming to speak for the Mayor to gain influence with the Japanese government. In one instance, this tactic enabled an executive of a mainland corporation to meet with a high government official. Later, one of the movers and fixers boasted, "I arranged it. I made connections with that official three years ago when Mayor Kishimoto agreed to relocation of the base in Nago. I told the executive all he had to do to get a meeting was mention the Mayor's name and, sure enough, the doors opened right away."

During the time that executives from mainland corporations were meeting with high government officials, a strange scenario unfolded. A compromise plan was proposed that would combine two of the three construction methods by reclaiming land off Henoko's shore which would be connected by bridge to a runway built on a landing wharf. In support of this plan, the executives told officials that "Mayor Kishimoto wants this compromise implemented." At this point the landing wharf camp had to give up hopes for exclusive contracts. While government leaders were saying for public consumption that they would "respect the wishes of local residents" and "never go over their heads in making a decision," in reality they strongly favored construction on reclaimed land. There were few precedents for either the landing wharf or pontoon methods with many unknown factors. And, most important, construction on reclaimed land would be more than 300 billion yen (about 2.5 billion dollars) cheaper. In fact, top officials in the Defense Facilities Agency insisted that "both the Japanese and U.S. governments agree that construction on reclaimed land is the only alternative."

Now the Japanese government began using any and every means to pressure the local community behind the scenes. Earlier this year, the head of the Defense Facilities Agency summoned an influential businessman in the landing wharf camp to Tokyo. Their conversation reportedly went as follows:

Agency Head: If you just give your o.k., everything will be resolved. Won't you settle the matter by agreeing to construction on reclaimed land?

Influential Businessman: I can't do that. I'm only here to convey the views of the Mayor who favors a landing wharf.

Agency Head: Just leave everything to me. I can promise benefits in return. Please find some way to help us.

Holding the power to issue construction contracts for the base, the head of the Defense Facilities Agency made this offer of profits to one businessman confident that, if he could be enticed, the Mayor, too, would go along. In this way, behind closed doors, the government bared its shameless machinations.

Profits over Practicality

Construction companies in the land reclamation camp were also bolstering their local offensive, forming a front led by Bechtel, the giant American construction company with close ties to the U.S. government. The front also included large firms in Okinawa as well as small local contractors in Henoko. Perhaps sensing that capturing Mayor Kishimoto might not be easy, they curried favor with key officials at Nago City Hall. The fruits of this rear-guard action were evident in the lament of one high Defense Agency official. "The Mayor seems to favor a landing wharf, but the only thing city officials talk about when they come here is reclaiming land. What the hell's going on?"

Okinawa's Governor Inamine Keiichi, supported by business interests in the prefecture, had initially sided with the land reclamation camp because construction contracts would go to companies in Okinawa. But things changed when the powers-that-be in Nago came out with their compromise plan. The head of one business organization confirmed that "The final decision to support the plan was made by Mayor Kishimoto's people in Nago, and we went along. Even if only a portion of the construction were for a landing wharf, it would involve hundreds of thousands of square meters of shore land. The project would fill the bellies of every company in Okinawa."

Local firms in the pontoon camp who had joined the race for construction contracts as the representatives of "local interests," were now the first to fall by the wayside. With the choice last December of a shoal reef as the construction site, all possibilities ended for building a runway on floating pontoons. At this point, Ishikawa-jima Harima Heavy Industries and several steel companies in the pontoon camp switched sides to the landing wharf camp. Companies in the pontoon and landing wharf camps then formed interest groups which they called "research associations." The register of the "Giant Floating Platform Integrated Systems Research Association"

(pontoon camp) listed 17 companies, while the register of the "Q.I.P. Heliport Promotion Research Association" (landing wharf camp) listed 19 companies. 16 companies listed themselves in both associations. Most of these firms would have no role to play in construction on reclaimed land, but could expect to receive large contracts for either landing wharf or pontoon construction which require huge quantities of manufactured steel. With one horse having lost, they were able to stay alive in the contract race by splitting their bets between the other two. And now the majority of contractors in Nago who had felt "morally obligated" to the companies in the pontoon camp that had courted them, also switched sides to the landing wharf camp, and began backing the proposed compromise with the land reclamation camp.

As usual, the construction industry was moving to the beat of profits, not practicality. Support grew steadily for the compromise plan and by late June, one month before the scheduled meeting of the Japanese government's Facility Relocation Council, blueprints for it had been distributed to leaders of the parties concerned. But now local participants discovered that the government was scrambling desperately to put the brakes on momentum for the compromise plan, already widely supported, and moving rapidly to push through a decision for construction on reclaimed land.

Though few in number, some senior officials in the government had indicated that they would accept the compromise plan. "I go along with Mayor Kishimoto," said one. "If he opposes construction on reclaimed land, I would not support it." But during the last month before its scheduled meeting, Council Chairman Omi Koji, who was also the government Minister for Okinawa Prefecture at the time, moved to take control of the situation. He issued orders that officials who supported the compromise plan were to say nothing more about it, and rammed through a decision for construction exclusively on reclaimed land. Nago City officials saw Omi's actions as motivated by his desire to show his effectiveness in hopes of receiving another post in the impending Cabinet reshuffling

At this point Mayor Kishimoto received notification both of the decision made for construction on reclaimed land and of the next Council meeting. Concerned local residents protested the sudden decision, but the Mayor had no choice but to go along. His associates told him, "We have to take what we can get. The government is moving ahead with an economic development plan, not only for Nago, but for the surrounding communities as well. If we reject their plan for construction on reclaimed land, we'll lose everything and leave a black mark on our history."

On the morning of July 29 in the conference room of the Prime Minister's residence, the Cabinet, Governor Inamine, and Mayor Kishimoto were all present, and voiced their assent "without objection" to the decision for construction on reclaimed land. Once again, the trade-off--bases for economic development--became a done deal.

The Gold Rush Begins

"Yesterday those two were in a drunken brawl, but today they have their arms around each other. In the construction business we can always let bygones be bygones," said a member of the Henoko land reclamation camp with a laugh. Indeed, industry representatives had already put the past behind them and were all rushing full speed ahead to carve out whatever they could from the impending base construction project. Now no one was criticizing sweet-talking politicians. With hopes unbridled, businessmen eagerly anticipated that "If we just ask the Mayor, he'll be sure to put us in for contracts from the mainland corporations."

Next, the leaders of business organizations in Okinawa revealed that "everyone's looking for rocks." The megaliths required for reclaiming land from the ocean could not be mined in the prefecture, so some businessmen were promoting the idea of importing rocks from Fujian Province in China while others were planning to transport ossified lava from Sakurajima in Kagoshima Prefecture.

However, constructing a 330 billion yen (about 2.7 billion dollars) runway on reclaimed land requires the most advanced technology. Executives of the largest construction companies in Okinawa were infuriated to discover that "There are no profits in it for us." Local firms could expect some work orders for reclaiming land along the shore, but they did not have the means for carrying out construction on an offshore site. "We'll get a few subcontracts, but all the profits will be hauled away by the mainland corporations. It's like their handing out a little 'overseas development aid.'" But their protests were too little too late.

Meanwhile, the Japanese government was busy lining up the procedural hoops for construction. Following adoption of the master plan, there would be an environmental assessment that would take three years. After that, construction could begin off the coast of Henoko, at the earliest, in 2005.

Progressives are Split in the Gubernatorial Election

The upcoming gubernatorial election of November 17 offers a rare opportunity to put the brakes on this hurtling bandwagon. The incumbent Governor Inamine has marshaled a rock-solid alliance of the Liberal Democratic Party and Komeito, and is appealing to voters that he would approve construction of the base only if there is a 15-year time limit on its use by the U.S. military. But, in their efforts to respond, the progressives failed to gain support from the Social Democratic Party and the Japan Communist Party for a unity candidate, and are split for the first time in a gubernatorial election. Yoshimoto Masanori, the candidate supported by the S.D.P., favors moving the American base at Futenma to the U.S. base at Iwakuni, in Yamaguchi Prefecture near Hiroshima. Arakaki Shigenobu, supported by the J.C.P., calls for unconditional return of the land now occupied by the base. But problems already plaguing the progressives before these policy differences surfaced have also strengthened Inamine's prospects for reelection.

Does this mean that the new base that was rejected by Nago voters in a municipal referendum is going to be built after all? Even now local residents who have supported its construction betray a certain uneasiness. One of them notes that. "All we have now are blueprints, so nobody knows for sure. But I think everyone will be surprised if they actually lay a 2500-by-730 meter runway on that reef. It'd be weird."

Before the July meeting of the Facility Relocation Council, this man had asked Mayor Kishimoto, who had just announced the decision for construction on reclaimed land, whether the Mayor had cleared it with the landing wharf camp. Mayor Kishimoto answered that "This is not being done for the benefit of businesses."

But what is the truth? At every level of the decision-making process--from the Japanese government to Okinawa Prefecture to Nago City and Henoko Village--construction companies have intervened. This spectacular battle of vested interests could hardly speak more eloquently that the national policy project to relocate the base at Futenma is for nothing but "the benefit of businesses."

The Course of Events Leading to the Decision on a Construction
Method for the Base to be Relocated from Futenma

4/1996
Prime Minister Hashimoto and U.S. Ambassador Walter Mondale announce the decision to return the land occupied by the Marine Corps Air Station at Futenma.

12/1996
In its final report SACO (Special Action Committee for Okinawa) speficies that a replacement base will be built on the east coast of Okinawa Main Island.

11/1997
Director Kyuma of the Defense Agency specifies two alternative construction methods, landing wharf and pontoon.

12/1997
Nago voters opposing the base win a municipal referendum. Mayor Higa announces his approval of its construction, then resigns.

2/1998
Kishimoto Tateo, Mayor Higaï¿½Bï¿½bs designated successor, is elected Mayor of Nago.

11/1998
Advocating construction on land of an airport for joint military and civilian use, Inamine Keiji is elected Governor of Okinawa.

12/1999
Mayor Kishimoto announces his approval for relocating the base off the coast of Henoko.

12/2000
The Facility Relocation Council, comprised of representatives from the Japanese government, Okinawa Prefecture, Nago City, and the villages of Higashi and Ginoza, holds its first meeting.

8/2001
At the seventh meeting of the Facility Relocation Council the Japanese government presents eight proposals for three alternative construction methods--reclaimed land, landing wharf, and pontoon.

12/2001

At the eighth meeting of the Facility Relocation Council a reef is designated as the construction site.

2/2002 Kishimoto is reelected Mayor of Nago.

7/2002
At the ninth meeting of the Facility Relocation Council the decision is finalized for construction on reclaimed land.

11/2002
Election for Governor of Okinawa.

Reclaimed Land Method
Adopted in the master plan. Construction offshore requires advanced ocean engineering technology and costs 330 billion yen (about 2.7 billion dollars).

Landing Wharf Method
As the term indicates, a runway is mounted on beams sunk in the ocean floor. Final cost of construction would be just under 700 billion yen (about 5.8 billion dollars).

Pontoon Method
A connected series of box-shaped blocks floating on the ocean's surface form the runway. The cost of seaborne construction estimated at 860 billion yen (about 7.1 billion dollars).

Translation by Steve Rabson