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Anger Explodes as a U.S. Army Helicopter Crashes at Okinawa International University

by Sanechika Yoshio

[Introduction: The fiery explosion and crash of a U.S. helicopter into a building at Okinawa International University on August 13 has touched off the most intense anti-base movement since the 1995 rape of a 12-year old Okinawan girl by three U.S. servicemen.

The U.S. Marine Corps Futenma Air Station, located in densely populated Ginowan adjacent to the campus, has been scheduled for relocation for nearly a decade. But with a powerful opposition movement in Henoko, the prospective new site, and mounting Okinawa-wide opposition to any new base on the island, the plan remains in limbo.

Anger built when Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro refused to meet with Ginowan Mayor Iha Yoichi and Okinawan Governor Inamine Keiichi when they traveled to Tokyo to discuss the issues.

A demonstration of 30,000 people on Sunday September 12 was the largest protest in nearly a decade. A six-point resolution adopted by the protesters was submitted to Tokyo with 55,000 signatures. It demanded:

Apology, compensation and full explanation of the cause of the crash;

Suspension of U.S. military flights over civilian areas;

An end to helicopter functions at Futenma;

Early return to Japan of the Futenma base;

Review of the 1996 Special Action Committee on Okinawa agreement and the planned relocation of Futenma's functions to a facility in Henoko;

Fundamental revision of the Japan-U.S. Status of Forces Agreement.

Faced with this powerful backlash, on September 10, U.S. officials agreed to renegotiate accident guidelines with Japan. There is no indication, however, that either the Japanese or U.S. governments are prepared to abandon plans for the new heliport at Futenma or that they will accept demands to eliminate the Marine station entirely.]

An hour and after the accident, in the face of the U.S. Army's strict off-limit regulations, a cameraman and I stole into the campus of Okinawa International University, Ginowan City, where a helicopter had just crashed. The emergency bell was ringing and almost all window glass on the first floor building was smashed, the shards scattered on the floor. Pieces of concrete and helicopter parts were everywhere. It looked like a battlefield.

When U.S. Army personnel discovered us, they demanded the videotape. The cameraman, however, fled. Students and citizens who were watching the incident surrounded the soldiers who raced after the cameraman and there a commotion ensued. When finally detained by the soldiers, he refused to surrender the tape.

Judging from the film of the anti-theft camera at a store near the crash, it was 2:18 p.m. on August 13 that helicopter CH-53D, a larger transport helicopter, crashed. The camera recorded a dull sound at that moment.

According to eye witnesses, the helicopter's rear rotor broke off just before the crash, bringing it down. As it fell in a tail spin, parts scattered. Within the few minutes between the crash and the explosion and flames that it precipitated, about twenty staff people in the building evacuated in panic to another building. Over one hundred students in other buildings fled in confusion.

Okinawa International University, the site of the crash, is adjacent to Futenma Air Base. About 300 meters behind the Ginowan civic hall the rear rotor was found. The parts that fell struck seventeen houses and thirty-three vehicles. One crew member was severely injured and two others were slightly wounded. It was a miracle that no citizens were wounded in this crowded residential area.

The response of the U.S. military was swift. It was as though they were aware of the accident before the fall and instantly closed off the site. "They arbitrarily seized control of the site in a civilian area and obstruct access of the mass media to information. This clearly violates the Status of Forces Agreement," according to Arakaki Ben of the Okinawa Lawyers Association who is knowledgeable about the agreement. This time the U.S. military closed off not only the site of the accident but the school buildings that were damaged and restricted the movement of university staff and even policemen.

The U.S. Japan Status of Forces Agreement specifies that the right of management of U.S. property is under U.S. jurisdiction. If the Japanese side wishes to inspect, it requires U.S. permission. This is to protect military secrets.

This time, however, the U.S. side took control of the entire area around the crash and for four days traffic on the adjacent road was stopped.

The prefectural police and fire department could photograph only from outside the cordoned off area and the U.S. unilaterally removed the helicopter remains. That was six days after the incident when not even broken parts remained. "I wonder if the U.S. military confused the inside and outside of the base. If I were the head of the prefectural police, I would order American soldiers who obstruct inspection arrested for obstruction of official duties," Arakaki stated.

The Okinawa Lawyers Association also issued an unusual protest stating "It is clear that illegal police powers were invoked in violation of the sovereign rights of our country."

However, the Japanese government response was lethargic and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs did not protest. One prefectural police officer, when it became difficult to document the damage as a result of removal of the helicopter openly expressed anger: "We can't allow this. We too are Okinawans. If the same accident had occurred in Tokyo, the response would not have been the same. It looks as if government concern does not extend to Okinawa."

Ignoring repeated request to stop helicopter flights in the congested area, the U.S. military resumed flights of the same model helicopter in the name of "Iraq-

related activity" on August 22.

In this situation, on the twenty first, at Ginowan City, a citizens' meeting involving 2,200 citizens demanded the immediate closing of the base. Perhaps due to a sense of crisis, many individuals, including parents and children participated.

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