

A rape on Okinawa highlights fragility of US-Japan relations

Peter Symonds
7 July 2001

The alleged rape of a Japanese woman by a US soldier rapidly escalated over the last week into a major incident requiring the personal involvement of President Bush and Japan's Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi to defuse. Coming right at the point when both leaders were meeting in the US to try to consolidate a closer alliance, it served to highlight the underlying tensions between the two powers.

The alleged crime took place in a parking lot in the town of Chatan in the early hours of July 29. Staff-Sergeant Timothy Woodland, 24, a member of the 353rd Special Operations Group stationed at the Kadena air base, is accused of raping a 20-year-old Japanese woman on the bonnet of a parked car and then fleeing the scene in a car with US military licence plates.

Woodland was taken into military custody on the airbase and questioned by Japanese police last weekend. He has denied the charges but local police claim to have several witnesses and to have found Woodland's fingerprints at the scene. A warrant for his arrest was issued on Monday but US military authorities refused to immediately hand him over, citing the State of Forces Agreement (SOFA) between the US and Japan. Under the agreement, the military is not obliged to turn over personnel accused of crimes until a formal indictment has been made.

There has long been opposition to the presence of US military bases on Okinawa. Public outrage over the rape of a 12-year-old girl by three US servicemen in 1995 led to huge protests against the bases. As a result the US was compelled to concede that it would give "sympathetic consideration" to future Japanese requests for the handing over of US personnel accused of "heinous crimes".

The delay in transferring Woodland to Japanese police jurisdiction provoked protests in Okinawa and growing pressure on the Koizumi government to insist that the US military abide by the arrest warrant. A well-known news presenter, Tetsuya Chiksushi, lambasted Koizumi playing ball with Bush in front of the press at Camp David last weekend but failing to protest the alleged rape the day before.

The Okinawan prefectural assembly unanimously adopted a resolution calling for the immediate transfer of the serviceman to police custody and seeking an apology and compensation for the crime. It called for a consolidation of American bases, an immediate reduction in US troop numbers on the island and "a drastic revision" of the Status of Forces Agreement. Two major newspapers— *Asahi Shimbun* and *Mainichi Shimbun*—also called for the renegotiation of the terms of SOFA.

By Thursday, as intense negotiations continued, Koizumi were forced to intervene. Returning from his trip to the US and Europe, the prime minister told reporters that he hoped that the US would "understand emotions here" and "make an appropriate decision quickly".

On the same day Japanese Defence Minister Gen Nakatani warned that the issue was impacting on the alliance between the two countries. "It must not happen that we allow the frustration of people in the Okinawa prefecture to escalate to the degree that they step up calls for a review of the presence of bases, and thereby strain the trust between Japan and the US," he said.

In an effort to defuse the issue, US Secretary of State Colin Powell rang Japan's Foreign Minister Makiko Tanaka to explain that Bush had been personally involved in the discussion over the issue and had urged the military to co-operate fully with Japanese authorities.

Finally on Friday the US announced that it had handed over Woodford to Japanese police after receiving assurances about his treatment. US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage acknowledged that "emotions were very heated" but denied there had been any undue delay. "I believe however that the decision to turn over the sergeant was made in sufficient time to keep this from becoming a situation that got out of control," he said.

The US and Japanese administrations will undoubtedly now try to push the incident to one side. But the very fact that allegations of rape in a Chatan parking lot should so rapidly require the involvement of Bush and Koizumi points to more fundamental tensions between the two countries.

In the first instance, Koizumi was reacting to the protests of Okinawans. The alleged rape is just the latest in a long series of incidents involving US servicemen which have become the focus of local opposition to the US military. The US bases on Okinawa are the largest in Asia and their presence dominate every aspect of life on the island. There are 37 military facilities covering around 20 percent of the island's landmass and house 26,000 of the 48,000 US military personnel stationed in Japan.

Local animosities go back to World War II when Okinawa was the site of some of the bloodiest battles in the Pacific. More than 230,000 people are estimated to have died in two months of fighting between April and July 1945—12,000 US troops lost their lives. The remaining casualties were Japanese—including more than 100,000 civilians or about a quarter of the island's population at the time. While American military occupation of Japan formally ended in 1952, the US only relinquished control of Okinawa and nearby islands in 1972.

The widespread resentment among Okinawans towards the US bases was highly visible in July last year when the island was the venue for the G-7 summit. More than 27,000 protestors used the opportunity to protest Clinton's presence by forming a human chain around the 18-kilometre fence outside the huge Kadena air base. Clinton repeated a vague commitment to "reducing our footprint on the island" but tensions have continued to flare.

In February, US marine corps Lieutenant-General Earl Hailston was forced to publicly apologise after the leaking of an email exposed all too clearly the contemptuous attitude of the US military to local people. Hailston, who was in charge of US forces on Okinawa, sent an email to 13 other senior officers complaining that the local governor and vice-governor had stood "idly by as the assembly passed an inflammatory and damaging resolution... I think they are all nuts and a bunch of wimps."

Such is the sensitivity in Japan to the issue of Okinawa that Koizumi made a special visit to the island prior to his trip to the US. Speaking at a ceremony to honour the war dead, he said that his cabinet would do "our utmost to find ways to lighten the burden on the people of Okinawa." The issue was reportedly discussed in private by Koizumi and Bush but nothing of substance was announced. Deputy Secretary of State Armitage in May ruled out any concession on one of the major current sources of friction—the US military's intention to build a new helicopter base at Nago to replace a previous facility at Futenma.

However, the response in Washington and Tokyo to the latest incident on Okinawa cannot be explained simply by local opposition. Superficially, relations between the two Cold War allies are growing even closer.

Bush has made clear that he intends to rely more heavily on Japan within the region and wants Japan to play a greater military role. He went out of his way to give the red carpet treatment to Koizumi in the US, praising the Japanese prime minister in particular for being prepared to take the "hard decisions" involved in implementing economic restructuring.

But the US determination to keep its military on Okinawa underscores a fact that is increasingly unpalatable to sections of the Japanese ruling class. Washington expects to be able to lay down terms to its ally in much the same way as it has done throughout the postwar period when Japan as the defeated power had to accept the dominant role of the US.

Koizumi and Japanese nationalists such as Tokyo mayor Shintaro Ishihara have welcomed Bush's calls for a closer alliance. But in doing so they are seeking to enhance Japan's economic and strategic interests in the region, not to have them subordinated to those of the US. In particular Koizumi and others are seeking to exploit the US call for Japan to play a greater military role as one way to overcome widespread Japanese opposition to the removal of the so-called pacifist clause to the country's constitution.

The views of Koizumi and Ishihara reflect the sentiments of significant sections of the ruling elite who insist that while the US alliance is important, Tokyo can no longer afford to play second fiddle to Washington. The tensions that flared up over Sergeant Woodford simply highlight the contradiction inherent in US-Japan relations—each side is seeking an alliance, but for their own, increasingly conflicting, purposes.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact