Japan: Mass protest against US base on Okinawa

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A rally of 90,000 people in Japanese prefecture of Okinawa on Sunday, protesting against the continued presence of a US Marine air base at Futenma, has heightened the political crisis facing the seven-month-old Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) government over the issue.

Having pledged during last year's election campaign to remove the base, Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama has failed to reach a deal with the US. The Obama administration is insisting that the DPJ abide by an agreement reached with the previous Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) government to shift the base, in modified form, to the less populated Henoko Bay, while transferring 7,000 marines to Guam.

Sunday's demonstration in Yomitanson was the largest ever in Okinawa. Protesters came from all 41 municipalities of the prefecture, decked out in yellow to show the government a "yellow card"—a warning. Many more people dangled a yellow flag from car mirrors or wore a yellow scarf to show their support for the demonstration.

Nago mayor Susumu Inamine told the rally: "Though [Hatoyama] pledged to relocate the air station outside Okinawa Prefecture, the government has been wavering on this issue. There are even signs [the government will proceed with the initial plan] to relocate functions of the air station to the Henoko district. These haphazard measures and the unscrupulous approach simply mock residents of the prefecture."

Inamine won the local election last year with the help of the Democrats by campaigning as an opponent of the US air base. Even Okinawa governor Hirokazu Nakima, who is an LDP leader and accepted the 2006 deal, attended the rally and referred to the huge burden of the US military on local residents.

The extent of the protest reflects longstanding grievances over the huge US bases in Okinawa, which houses half of the 44,000 American military personnel in Japan. Futenma base is situated in the densely populated area of Ginowan and another major base for US Air Force in Kadena is also located near residential area. In addition to ammunition storages and training grounds, the US military is occupying nearly one fifth of the main Okinawa island. Concerns about pollution, accidents and the economic impact are bound up with wider anti-militarist sentiments.

Okinawa played a significant role as a springboard for the US-led wars in Korea and Vietnam, provoking sustained demonstrations against the latter, and the US military presence, in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The region remained under direct US administration until 1972 when protests forced its return to Japanese control. Controversy flared again after the brutal rape of a young schoolgirl by US servicemen in 1995.

During last year's election, the DPJ's promise to revise the 2006 agreement with the US on the Futenma base was part of broader efforts to make an anti-war appeal. Hatoyama also pledged to expose secret deals between the US and Japanese governments to allow nuclear weapons into Japan and to end Japan's naval refuelling mission in support of the US-led occupation in Afghanistan.

While cautiously adopting a more independent foreign policy oriented to Asia, the DPJ government

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has been reluctant to jeopardise the US alliance, which has been the bedrock of Japanese foreign policy since World War II. On taking office, Hatoyama immediately placed the 2006 agreement under review and has ignored US pressure to endorse the 2006 agreement. He resisted US efforts to seal a deal before US President Obama visited Tokyo last November.

As a self-imposed May 31 deadline approaches, Hatoyama is running out of options. Several alternatives, including moving some US air operations to Tokunoshima Island, north of Okinawa, have also met with protests from local residents. However, Tokyo's relations with Washington already have been strained by the ending of its naval refuelling mission and revelations of secret Cold War agreements that allowed US warships carrying nuclear weapons to enter Japanese ports.

The US has refused to offer any significant concessions over the Futenma base. Moreover, President Obama delivered Hatoyama what amounted to an ultimatum at the Nuclear Security Summit in Washington earlier this month. Allocating just 10 minutes for a meeting with the Japanese prime minister on April 12, he bluntly told Hatoyama that Tokyo was running out of time. "Japanese officials were so taken aback by the toughness of Obama's tone that they did not draw up a written record of the words exchanged between the two leaders," the *Washington Post* reported.

A day later, the Japanese government appears to have played up the military threat from China in a bid to change the public mood. Media reports began appearing about a routine Chinese naval exercise in international waters about 140 kilometres from the main island of Okinawa. Japan sent destroyers and planes for close surveillance and published photos of Chinese warships. The foreign ministry issued a diplomatic protest over Chinese helicopters flying "dangerously" close to Japanese warships.

However, the scare campaign had no impact on the mass opposition to the US base in Okinawa. On the contrary, signs that Hatoyama may break his promise to move the US base out of the prefecture have only prompted public outrage.

The *Washington Post* reported last Saturday that US officials were "pleased" by a Japanese proposal last week to "broadly accept" the 2006 agreement. Based on unnamed sources, the article stated that Foreign Minister Katsuya Okada had presented a plan to US ambassador John Roos that included relocating the air base to Henoko, with some modifications.

Hatoyama insisted the report was "not necessarily true". He reiterated that he would not accept the old deal, but did not rule out a modified version. US assistant secretary of state Kurt Campbell, who is visiting Tokyo this week, told the *Asahi Shimbun* on Tuesday that Washington had received "serious proposals from the Japanese government that included promising elements". Following the visit, Hatoyama indicated that he was considering a proposal, but gave no details.

Public support for the Hatoyama government has dropped sharply since it came to office last September and failed to address public concern over falling living standards. A poll published by *Nikkei* newspaper on Monday following the Okinawa protest showed only 24 percent of respondents supported Hatoyama, down from 36 percent in March and 70 percent in September. Only 20 percent said they would vote for the DPJ in upper house elections in July—still ahead of the 14 percent for the LDP.

If Hatoyama does cave in to US demands, support is likely to fall further, compounding the crisis that faces not only his government, but the political establishment as a whole.

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