

Court case begins in Japan over Okinawa base relocation

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The first court hearing between the Japanese government and the prefectural administration of Okinawa began last week over the construction of a contentious new US military base. The installation faces widespread opposition in Japan, as does the US military presence on Okinawa and Japan's remilitarization under Prime Minister Shinzo Abe.

On November 17, Tokyo filed a lawsuit against Okinawa after the prefectural governor, Takeshi Onaga, revoked a building permit on October 13 for a new US Marine air base at Henoko.

Former Governor Hirokazu Nakaima granted the permit in 2013 to carry out reclamation work along Okinawa's coast, but Onaga cancelled it, saying: "The relevant bureaux have examined the permit and determined there are flaws." These "flaws" included a lack of environmental protection measures and an insufficient explanation of the project from the Defense Ministry.

The new facility at Henoko would replace the current US Marine Corps Air Station Futenma, located in the center of the densely populated city of Ginowan. Moving the base is part of a 2006 deal in which the US agreed to close down the Futenma base and move some Marines to Guam, so long as a new location within Okinawa was provided.

Last week, Onaga appeared at the Naha Branch of the Fukuoka High Court to justify his decision. Referring to the US bases, he said: "Does local autonomy or democracy exist in Japan? Is it normal that Okinawa alone bears the burden?" Onaga's agitation against the new base has not been directed at US militarism, which he supports, but at appealing to Okinawan resentment towards the mainland. "Okinawa has never voluntarily provided property (for US bases)," the governor declared.

Speaking for the central government, Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga stated from Tokyo: "It is extremely important that we remove the present danger (of the Futenma base)," while adding, "The central government is moving ahead with the construction work."

Plans to move the Futenma base were first proposed in 1996, following the brutal rape of a 12-year-old girl by three US servicemen the previous year which stoked widespread anti-US sentiment. Residents have long complained of other crimes, accidents and noise caused by the US military.

This year, protests ranging from hundreds to tens of thousands have occurred demanding a halt to the facility's construction. Protestors have regularly denounced the Henoko plans at demonstrations throughout the summer against new laws that permit the Japanese military to join US-led wars in the name of "collective self-defense." These protests included a rally of 120,000 people in Tokyo on August 30.

Onaga, a right-wing politician, was elected in November 2014, largely due to his opposition to the base relocation. A former member of Abe's Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), he is a strong supporter of the US-Japan security treaty. In a July interview with *Toyo Keizai*, a Japanese business publication, Onaga stated: "I have served as a politician for over 30 years, and I have consistently supported the US-Japan security arrangement."

The Okinawan governor speaks for a layer of local businesses that hope to profit by turning the island into a tourist destination. Onaga has called the US bases the "biggest impediment" to economic development, as together they occupy approximately one-fifth of the main island.

The prefecture as a whole has been designated a

special economic zone, with subsidies to attract foreign investors as Okinawa attempts to boost its economy. An unemployment rate twice as high as on the mainland is being politically exploited by big business to drum up public support for this aim.

None of the opposition parties represent an alternative to the LDP or Onaga. The Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) was completely discredited over its handling of the issue. It came to office in 2009 under the promise that it would remove the Futenma base from the prefecture, but the Obama administration flatly refused to even discuss the matter. The DPJ quickly reneged on its election promise and accepted the 2006 deal.

That confrontation, which saw the removal of Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama in 2010, made clear that the US regards Okinawa as a crucial strategic base as it expands its military presence in the Asia Pacific and prepares for war against China. Okinawa, which the US directly administered from the end of World War II until 1972, is adjacent to the Chinese mainland.

The Japanese Communist Party (JCP) has hailed Onaga for his stance on the base. On September 15, as the Okinawan government was threatening to revoke the Henoko base building permit, the JCP stated in its English language press: “It will be important to support the decision made by the Onaga-led government nationwide and increase public opposition so that Okinawa can win in the upcoming court struggle against the central government.”

While it postures as an opponent of Abe’s militarism, the JCP has lined up, first with the DPJ government, then Abe’s administration, in asserting Japanese sovereignty over the contested Senkaku/Diaoyu islands in the East China Sea. By supporting the claims of Japanese imperialism, the JCP is helping to stoke the atmosphere of anti-Chinese chauvinism that is being used by Abe as the pretext to remilitarize.

Abe’s government is continuing its own troop buildup in Okinawa Prefecture, which is comprised of three groups of islands from north to south: the Okinawa Islands, the Miyako Islands and Yaeyama Islands.

Last month, Tokyo announced that it would dispatch 500 ground troops to Ishigaki Island, only 90 nautical miles from the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. Vice Minister of Defense Kenji Wakamiya visited Ishigaki on November 26 to outline the government’s plans.

Ishigaki, located within the Yaeyama Island portion of the prefecture, also has jurisdiction over the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, according to Japan. This step will undoubtedly raise tensions with China, which also claims the uninhabited islands.

The deployment, scheduled to be completed by 2019, will include a Marine-type force able to respond to a supposed invasion of nearby islands and another to operate surface-to-air and surface-to-ship missiles. Other troop increases include 150 soldiers on Yonaguni Island, also part of the Yaeyamas, by next March and 800 soldiers and missile units on Miyako Island. Another 550 soldiers are to be dispatched by 2018 to Amami Oshima, an island just north of Okinawa in the Kagoshima Prefecture.



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