

Opposition grows to US military bases on Okinawa

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On Sunday, at a mass protest in Okinawa, Japan, demonstrators denounced the US military presence in the prefecture as well as plans to relocate a US Marines base to elsewhere on the island. Organizers said 65,000 people took part, making it the largest demonstration on the island since protests over the 1995 rape of a 12-year-old Okinawan girl by three US soldiers.

Demonstrators gathered in Okinawa's capital Naha carrying signs reading, "Our anger is past its limit" and "Pull out the US Marines" to condemn the rape and murder last month of Rina Shimabukuro, a 20-year-old Okinawan woman. Kenneth Franklin Gadson (who also goes by his wife's name Shizato), an American military contractor, allegedly admitted to the crime and was arrested on May 19, the same day the woman's body was discovered. Shimabukuro had been missing since April and her body was found dumped in a wooded area.

The demonstrators demanded the removal of the US Marine Corps Air Station Futenma and other military bases from Okinawa. The central government plans to move the Futenma base to Henoko, along the island's coast. A recent poll by the *Ryukyu Shimpo* newspaper and Okinawa television found 83.8 percent of people in the prefecture oppose the relocation plan.

Construction of the Henoko base has been halted since March, following a decision to settle a lawsuit the central government had brought against the Okinawan prefectural government. Land Minister Keiichi Ishii demanded Governor Takeshi Onaga, who repealed a land reclamation permit for the base last October, reverse his decision, in order to allow the work to continue. Onaga then went to the Central and Local Government Dispute Management Council, per the court settlement. The council decided on June 17 not to issue a decision on the matter, and called for "sincere

discussions" between the parties.

The anger felt by people in the prefecture go beyond the crimes committed by US military personnel. More than half the 47,000 US troops in Japan are located on Okinawa, occupying numerous bases that take up about one-fifth of the total land space. Many people still harbour resentment toward the US, which seized Okinawa at the end of World War II, killing 100,000 civilians, and occupied the island until 1972.

The basing issue is closely tied to the push for Japanese remilitarization by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). Workers and young people in Okinawa and throughout Japan have repeatedly denounced military legislation that was forced through the Diet last September to allow Tokyo to exercise "collective self-defence"—that is, to take part in US-led wars overseas.

The Abe government has integrated the Japanese military into the US "pivot to Asia" and military buildup throughout the region against China. Okinawa—directly adjacent to the Chinese mainland—is a crucial element of the Pentagon's war strategy, which involves a massive air and missile assault on Chinese targets from ships and nearby bases.

Local politicians like Governor Onaga, a former LDP member, are attempting to divert popular anger along narrow, parochial lines. "Vicious crimes cannot be tolerated," Onaga said during a speech at Sunday's protest. The governor has campaigned as an opponent of the US bases in his prefecture, winning support. However, he and his ilk exploit the frustrations of ordinary people, not to oppose militarism, but to boost their own political position.

The governor is a strong supporter of the US alliance, saying last July: "I have served as a politician for over 30 years, and I have consistently supported the US-

Japan security arrangement.” Onaga speaks for a layer of local business leaders who view the US bases as the “biggest impediment” to economic development, none of which would be enjoyed by Okinawan workers, who are among the poorest in Japan.

The opposition parties are also exploiting the widespread anti-war sentiment for electoral purposes. While the Democratic Party (DP) claims to be against revising the post-World War II constitution to permit Japanese military deployments, the party and its leader Katsuya Okada have previously voiced support for such measures while in office between 2009 and 2012. Other parties, like the Japanese Communist Party and Social Democratic Party, are painting the DP as an alternative to the current government in order to keep workers and youth tied to the parliamentary framework.

The United States is attempting to ward off opposition to its presence as well. During the G7 summit, which took place in Japan during May, President Barack Obama was compelled to address the Okinawan murder saying: “The United States will continue to cooperate fully with the investigation and ensure justice is done under the Japanese legal system.” Obama was clearly concerned about growing calls to revise the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA), which was originally signed in 1960 and governs how US personnel are to be treated legally. Many people in Japan feel SOFA provides undue protection to US soldiers who commit crimes.

Besides the murder of Rina Shimabukuro, there have been a string of other crimes in recent months. The military has imposed a curfew on Okinawa that bans US personnel from drinking in public and requires them to be home or on base before night. At the beginning of June, the US Navy imposed a separate drinking ban on its 18,600 sailors stationed throughout Japan following the arrest of a US sailor on suspicion of driving while intoxicated after being involved in a car accident that injured two people on Okinawa. This ban was eased recently, but still prohibits drinking off-base or outside of homes.

Earlier this year, two US military personnel were arrested for sexually assaulting Japanese women in separate cases. Justin Castellanos, a 24-year-old enlisted sailor, pleaded guilty in May to raping a Japanese tourist on Okinawa on March 13. A few days later, on May 18, a 33-year-old navy lieutenant was

arrested at Narita International Airport after reportedly groping a 19-year-old Japanese university student and then punching her repeatedly in the head during a flight from San Diego.

All these incidents are driving the deeply-felt hostility to the US military presence in Japan. However, Washington will not acquiesce to demands to move any bases that are central to its preparations for war with China.



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