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When a 12-year-old Okinawan schoolgirl was raped by three U.S. soldiers in the autumn of 1995, I was governor of Okinawa Prefecture. In my address to the people of Okinawa, I said, "I apologize to you all for failing to protect the girl's human rights and dignity."

I uttered these words not so much as an expression of my personal emotion, but more out of a sense of pained frustration that human rights violations would continue so long as Okinawa remained host to U.S. military bases, and I would be helpless to protect the human dignity of my fellow Okinawans.

The girl's rape set off a chain of events that led to the establishment of the Special Action Committee on Okinawa (SACO) to consolidate and reduce U.S. facilities.

According to the SACO Final Report of December 1996, Japan and the United States agreed on the return of land then occupied by 11 U.S. installations that included air stations,

training facilities and military ports.

That was more than seven years ago. However, not only has there been hardly any progress, Okinawa's base-related problems have actually grown worse.

Particularly disturbing are the circumstances surrounding the planned relocation of the Futenma Air Station, one of the focal issues addressed by SACO. On the pretext of adhering to the Final Report, the Japanese government insists on relocating that facility off the coast of Henoko in the city of Nago. But Okinawans have been protesting with sit-ins. And with various environmental groups warning against damage to coral reefs and other forms of environmental destruction, the Futenma issue has hit an impasse.

During World War II, Okinawa was the nation's "breakwater" that protected mainland Japan. And with the arrival of the U.S. forces after the war, Okinawa's renewed suffering has continued to this day. There has been little sympathy for Okinawa's plight among the rest of the Japanese public.

The government and many Japanese citizens insist the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty is necessary for the nation's security and prosperity. Yet, the last thing they want is a U.S. military base in their backyard. They have been callously taking advantage of Okinawans.

The U.S. military presence in Okinawa is not limited to the bases alone. About 40 percent of Okinawan air space and 29 sea areas in the prefecture are controlled by the U.S. forces. When local people are denied free use of their own land, air and sea, how could they be considered citizens of a sovereign nation?

The central government in Tokyo has been appallingly indifferent to this reality. And worse yet, many people-including even politicians-believe wrongly that the Okinawan economy would collapse without the U.S. military presence.

Here are the facts. Of Okinawa's 52 cities, towns and villages, the community with the highest annual income is a sugarcane farming village where there is no U.S. base. During the 1960s before Okinawa was returned to Japanese rule in 1972, U.S. base-related revenues accounted for half the prefecture's revenues, and about 50,000 people were employed at U.S. bases. Today, there are less than 10,000 base workers and, base-related revenues make up only 5 percent of the prefectural total.

There would be jobs for 10 times more people if the U.S. forces were to vacate their bases in urban areas and the returned land was developed by the private sector. Okinawa's tropical climate and abundant nature render it an ideal holiday destination, which should enable the prefecture to bolster revenues from tourism.

In short, the bases are actually hampering the development of Okinawa's economy, not sustaining it.

With the U.S. forces reorganizing themselves around the world, nothing is set in concrete anymore. Even though the Japanese government remains obsessed with the SACO Final Report, its very content no longer reflects the present reality. And in point of fact, nowhere does the report say anything about reclaiming an offshore area to relocate the Futenma Air Station, nor is there any mention of making it double as a civilian airfield.

Given these developments, Tokyo should stop hanging on to the past and call for a new round of negotiations with Washington, keeping in perspective the possibility of bases in Okinawa being relocated to areas outside Japan.

If Tokyo really means business, there is no question the Pentagon and the State Department will be flexible and accommodating. In fact, I do not see why we could not have SACO2 and SACO3.

Fukushiro Nukaga, chairman of the Liberal Democratic Party policy board, recently met with U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld in Washington. As a condition for stationing U.S. troops in Japan, Rumsfeld told Nukaga that the U.S. military power must be "welcomed" by the Japanese people.

Okinawans are never going to welcome U.S. bases in their land. All they want desperately is

to be able to live in peace without any more violations of their human rights.

Ota Masahide, a former governor of Okinawa Prefecture and historian of Okinawa, is currently a Social Democratic Party member of the Upper House. He contributed this commentary to The Asahi Shimbun. (International Herald Tribune/Asahi: June 5, 2004).