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Why did the US Military prevent Okinawa's two largest newspapers from covering one of its ceremonies? Revenge says the newspapers; tactics says the military.

By David McNeill

On April 1st, journalists from the Okinawa Times and the Ryukyu Shimpo were stunned to learn that they would not be allowed to participate with other media covering the return of the 31st Marine Expeditionary Unit from Iraq.

With a combined circulation of over 400,000 catering to a population of 1.3 million people, the newspapers believed they had the right to cover important US military ceremonies in a prefecture where the American presence is overwhelming.

Explaining why they were wrong, Major Brad Bartelt of the U.S. Marine Corps Headquarters in Okinawa (Camp Butler) claimed the decision to exclude the newspapers was made mainly based on lack of space.

"We could only accommodate a limited number of media due to the number of family members and friends, control of the crowd and safety concerns, and limited manpower for escorts.... Simply stated we needed to reach the largest audience with the fewest number of reporters."

Rubbish, say journalists at the newspapers,

who claim they are the victims of censorship.

"The US only invited agencies that would cover the news conveniently for them," says Tsuyoshi Matsumoto, who covers US-related issues for the Ryukyu Shimpo. "This flies in the face of the freedom of press and democracy that the United States is so proud of."

Matsumoto says it is not the first time the newspapers have felt excluded. "Since 1995 [when two marines and a sailor kidnapped and gang-raped a 12-year-old girl, sparking the largest anti-US demonstrations here since the end of World War 2], the military has prioritized other media like the Yomiuri over us in interview requests and so on."

The row comes amid growing tensions between the 50,000 US military personnel and their dependants who live in Okinawa, and the local media, which has often played a critical, sometimes adversarial, role in the six-decade relationship.

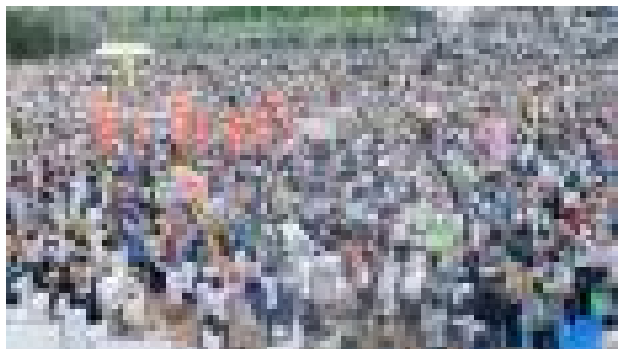
Already upset at what many islanders consider a flawed plan to replace Futenma airbase in Ginowan with a new base over a coral reef in the tiny fishing village of Henoko, the press reacted angrily to the August 2004 helicopter crash on the grounds of Okinawa International University, adjacent to the Ginowan base.

Okinawa police and reporters were barred from inspecting the crash site -- which was outside the military's jurisdiction. Still, the two newspapers gave by far the most detailed coverage of the incident and its aftermath, including attempts to prevent civilians from approaching or taking photographs. Journalists

say the whole episode reeked of arrogance, and worse.

“Some of us felt their attitude was almost colonial,” says the Okinawa bureau chief for one of the major national newspapers, who insisted on anonymity. “They just looked down on us and treated us like idiots.”

The crash provoked the largest anti-base demonstration since 1995, and the fallout continues: in May this year thousands of demonstrators linked arms around Futenma to demand the closure of the facility and many say the movement against the building of a new base at Henoko has been reenergized.



30,000 protestors at Ginowan on 12 September 2004.

US administrators blame the local press for stoking the fires of protest, as Major Brad Bartelt’s secondary comments on the coverage of the Marine Expeditionary Unit’s return make clear. “We invited media based on their reputation for responsible and professional journalism. Media that accurately and fairly report the facts.”

“More often than not, the Okinawa Times and Ryukyu Shimpo allow their publicly stated political bias to sway their reporting on important issues. Their coverage of our events and operations is one-sided, highly editorialized and often inflammatory.”

The statement apparently undermines the military’s own argument that space was the main factor in the April 1st ban. Ryukyu’s Matsumoto agrees “There has always been friction between us,” but does not accept the justice of the US decision to exclude the press on the basis of such friction.

“The military probably thinks we just attack them without considering the importance of the US-Japan Security Treaty. But we take a tough attitude toward affairs concerning U.S. forces in Okinawa, and try to write articles from the viewpoint of suffering local residents.”

Watanabe was “very surprised” at the ban. “I hadn’t expected them to go as far as to do they did.” But he thinks both sides need to cool off. “Our feeling is that we don’t want the same thing to happen again in the future. We want a better approach, rather than protesting harshly against the policy and making the situation worse.”

Others are more pointed: A letter to the Marine Corps Commandant written by three academics*, including former US Army veteran Steve Rabson, who served on Okinawa and is now Professor of East Asian Studies at Brown University, and signed by dozens of others, accuses the US of “taking revenge on local media.”

Islanders see the crash, says the latter, “as yet another violent reminder of the status of their islands, which account for only 0.6 percent of Japan’s land but more than 75 percent of all American military installations in Japan.”

“Okinawans regard the overwhelming presence of US forces, against the expressed will of local residents, as unfair and undemocratic, and can hardly accept the rationale of US forces who preach fair and balanced journalism while themselves violating a basic principle of democracy: freedom of the press.”

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Tokyo and is a regular contributor to a number of publications, including the London Independent and the Irish Times. He is a coordinator of Japan Focus. This is a slightly edited version of an article prepared for No. 1 Shimbun. Posted at Japan Focus July 16, 2005.