

Okinawa’s Henoko was a “storage location” for nuclear weapons: published accounts 沖縄・辺野古は核兵器貯蔵地 公開された文書

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Keywords, Henoko, atomic weapons, Richard Nixon, Eisaku Sato

According to accounts published after Okinawa’s reversion to Japan in 1972, nuclear weapons were stored in the northern Okinawan village of Henoko at an Army ordnance depot adjacent to the Marines’ Camp Schwab. The depot was constructed in 1959, becoming the Army’s 137th Ordnance Company (Special Weapons) and was turned over to the Marines as Camp Henoko (Ordnance Ammunition Depot) following reversion in 1972. The camp is located only a few hundred yards from the proposed site of the replacement base for the Futenma Marine Corps Air Station, which is located in the middle of densely populated Ginowan City. Newly re-instated Prime Minister Abe Shinzō has vowed to push for construction of the base, delayed more than sixteen years by local protests and despite widespread Okinawan opposition. The January 11, 2013 *Japan Times* reported, “The [Japanese] government may apply next month to bring in earth to fill a coastal area in [Henoko,] Okinawa where a U.S. Marine Corps air base is to be relocated, ahead of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s trip to the United States, government reports said Thursday.”

Henoko, long suspected by Okinawans to be a nuclear weapons site,¹ is specified as a “nuclear storage location” in the “agreed minute” negotiated between President Richard Nixon and Prime Minister Satō Eisaku in Washington, but not released to the press, as part of the

Okinawa Reversion Agreement of November, 1969.



Sato and Nixon, South Lawn of the White House, Nov 19, 1969

Wakaizumi Kei, Satō’s special envoy and interpreter, published a draft of the “agreed minute” in his book *Tasaku Nakarishi o Shinzamuto Hossu (I Want to Believe There Were No Other Options)*, Bungei Shunjū, 1994.² The existence of this document has never been officially recognized by the Japanese or U.S. governments. The English text of the agreement reads,

[Agreed Minute to Joint Communique of United States President Nixon and Japanese Prime Minister Sato \(Draft\)](#)

21st November, 1969

United States President:

As stated in our Joint Communique, it is the intention of the United States Government to remove all the nuclear weapons from Okinawa by the time of actual reversion of the administrative rights to Japan; and thereafter the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security and its related arrangements will apply to Okinawa, as described in the Joint Communique. However, in order to discharge effectively the international obligations assumed by the United States for the defense of countries in the Far East including Japan, in time of great emergency the United States Government will require the re-entry of nuclear weapons and transit rights in Okinawa with prior consultation with the Government of Japan. The United States Government would anticipate a favorable response. The United States Government also requires the standby retention and activation in time of great emergency of existing nuclear storage locations in Okinawa: Kadena, Naha, Henoko and Nike Hercules units.

Japanese Prime Minister:

The Government of Japan, appreciating the United States Government's requirements in time of great emergency stated above by the President, will meet these requirements without delay when such prior consultation takes place.

The President and the Prime Minister agreed that this Minute, in duplicate, be kept each only in the offices of the President and the Prime Minister and be treated in the strictest confidence between only the President of the United States and the Prime Minister of Japan.

Washington, D.C., November 21, 1969

As stated, the agreement not only pinpoints Henoko as a "storage location" for nuclear weapons, but specifies the option of its "activation" again "in time of great emergency" as determined by the United States government "with prior consultation of Japan" to which "the United States would anticipate a favorable response." . . . For its part, the Government of Japan agrees to "meet these requirements without delay when such prior consultation takes place." Despite the stated desire to keep the agreement in "strictest confidence," its subsequent revelation showed that Prime Minister Satō had not only broken his oft-stated promise of a post-reversion Okinawa without nuclear weapons (*kaku-nuki*), but he had violated his own proclamation in 1967 of "The Three Non-Nuclear Principles" for Japan (non-production, non-possession, and non-introduction), which was cited as a major reason for awarding him the Nobel Peace Prize in 1974.

An American source, a website for Army Ordnance veterans, includes the following as part of a brief career biography for Chief Warrant Officer 5 Cecil E. Hutson:

He attended the Army Nuclear Weapons Assembly Course at Albuquerque, New Mexico in 1962 and spent three years as NCOIC [Non-commissioned Officer in Charge] of the Nuclear Weapons

Assembly Team with the 137th Ordnance Co, [Henoko,] Okinawa. Due to his exceptional service in that assignment, he was selected as the Nuclear Weapons Advisor, Chief of Maintenance, DCSLOG [Deputy Chief of Staff for Logistics], 5th U.S. Army.³

Although precise locations are not mentioned, an article entitled “Where They

Were” by Robert S. Norris, William M. Arkin, and William Burr in the *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists* (November/December, 1999, pp. 26-35) reports, “Okinawa hosted 19 different types of nuclear weapons during the period 1954-1972.” Jon Mitchell writes that in 1971, one year before reversion scheduled for 1972, the U.S. government demanded and received payment from the Japanese government to help defray the expenses of removing nuclear weapons from Okinawa, the first official U.S. admission of their presence.⁴

Among the many troubling issues raised by these publications is the possibility that serious environmental hazards remain at nuclear storage areas in Okinawa, which include Henoko where construction of the proposed air base is planned. The aftermath of contamination following the nuclear disaster at Fukushima in 2011 only heightens such concerns. According to the U.S. environmental protection agency, “Over 1,000 United States locations, including both operational and abandoned sites, are contaminated with radiation. These sites range in size from small corners in laboratories to massive nuclear weapons facilities. The contamination may be found in the air, water, and soil, as well as equipment in buildings.” The report states that “these sites are closely monitored . . . to limit potential hazards.”⁵

Disturbing questions arise as to whether such assiduous efforts have been undertaken at

Henoko. The U.S. military has a dismal record of addressing contamination issues at its present and past military installations. The SOFA (Status of Forces Agreement), concluded under the U.S. Japan Security Treaty renewed in 1960, gives the U.S. military certain extra-territorial exemptions from Japanese civil and criminal law. The agreement provides no environmental protection provisions and the Japanese government is given no rights to on-site investigations within U.S. military facilities. Moreover, the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) exempts US military forces from their responsibility to deal with environmental cleanup at the sites of present or past installations. The Okinawa Prefectural Government submitted bills to revise SOFA in 1995 and in 2000, which included environmental protection articles, to the Japanese and the US governments. But the Japanese government has preferred operational changes to SOFA rather than amendments to it.⁶

In late 1969, 13,000 tons of poison gas that included Mustard, Sarin, and VX leaked from the chemical weapons storage depot at Chibana in central Okinawa. Residents over a wide area were forced to evacuate their homes for two months. Even after removal of the weapons began by ship the following year to Johnston Island in the Pacific, Okinawan employees at the base observed white smoke rising from the depot, and suffered pain in their eyes and throats. A report written by Government of the Ryukyu Islands investigators in 1971 concluded that residents’ continuing complaints of eye pain, skin irritation, and coughing, as well as the inexplicable withering of local plants, were likely associated with the nearby weapons storage depot.⁷

More recently, despite U.S. government denials, several American veterans have reported that large quantities of the defoliant Agent Orange were stored at Kadena Air Base in Okinawa for testing and troop training in

Okinawa during the Vietnam War. Some have filed claims with the Veterans Administration for disabilities caused by dioxin, the active ingredient in Agent Orange which devastates human tissues. Jon Mitchell writes, "U.S. veterans stationed on the island have claimed [that] burials of unwanted herbicides took place on Futenma Air Station and on former military land in Chatan Town. . . . [This is] of particular concern to Okinawa residents."⁸

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Recommended citation: Steve Rabson, "Okinawa's Henoko was a 'Storage Location' for Nuclear Weapons: Published Accounts," *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, Vol 11, Issue 1, No. 6, January 14, 2013."

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Notes

¹ See Okinawa Taimusu-sha, Kichi Mondai Shuzai-han, ed., "Henoko Dan'yaku-ko (Henoko Ammunition Storage Depot)" in *Okinawa no Kichi* (Bases in Okinawa), Okinawa Taimusu-sha, 1984, pp. 37-42. This chapter mentions the extremely tight security surrounding the base as well as an NOP (Nuclear Ordnance Platoon) assigned there, and includes an aerial photograph of a high-wire fenced in area containing heavily fortified storage igloos.

² The Japanese government officially released the "agreed minute" in 2008. In 2009, thirty-four years after Prime Minister Satō's death in 1975, a copy of it was found in a desk drawer of

the study at his former home in Setagaya Ward, Tokyo. See “Secret N-pact comes to light: Japan-U.S. accord was kept at Prime Minister Satō’s home,” *iStockAnalyst* December 22, 2009.

(<http://www.istockanalyst.com/article/view/iStockN>) Also see Gavan McCormack and Satoko Oka Norimatsu, *Resistant Islands: Okinawa Confronts Japan and the United States* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2012), p. 57 and Matsumoto Tsuyoshi, “Revealing ‘Secret’ U.S.-Japan Understandings”: A solemn obligation of Japan’s new government,” *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, 51-3-09, December 21, 2009. (<http://japanfocus.org/-Matsumoto-Tsuyoshi/3>)

³ “The Hall of Fame” (<http://www.goordnance.army.mil/hof/2000>)

⁴ Jon Mitchell, “‘Seconds Away from Midnight’: U.S. Nuclear Missile Pioneers on Okinawa Break Fifty Year Silence on a Hidden Nuclear Crisis in 1962,” *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, Vol 10, Issue 29, No. 1. July 16, 2012.

(<http://japanfocus.org/-Jon Mitchell/3798>)

⁵ “Radioactive Contamination at Clean-Up Sites,” www.epa.gov/radtown/clean-up.html

⁶ Ichiyo Muto (People’s Plan Study Groups), “U.S. Military Presence in Mainland Japan and Okinawa.”

(http://www.jca.apc.org/wsf_support/2004doc/WSFJapUSBaseRepoFinalAll.html#Environmental_Problems)

⁷ “Forty years after the removal operation of stocks of U.S. poison gas, a representative of residents says, ‘We live still close to the munitions depot,’” *Ryukyu Shimpo* [English Edition], January 13, 2013. <http://english.ryukyushimpo.jp/2011/07/25/2018/>

⁸ Jon Mitchell, “Herbicide Stockpile” at Kadena Air Base, Okinawa: 1971 U.S. Army report on Agent Orange,” (<http://japanfocus.org/-Jon Mitchell>)