

Okinawans Say “No Pasarán” to the U.S. Marines: A delegation to Washington asks the Obama administration to respect democracy

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Okinawans opposed to US base expansion on their island demonstrate at the White House on November 20th. (John Junkerman)

In November, 2015, with the world’s eyes focused on the latest terrorist threats to Europe and Africa, two dozen activists from the Japanese island of Okinawa came to Washington to demand justice for a region that the U.S. military has dominated since World War II.

The activists represent The All-Okinawa Council, a broad coalition of over 2,000 women’s rights activists, businessmen, trade unionists, academics and citizens’ groups formed to stop construction of a new Marine Corps base on an island that already hosts 32 American military installations.

Their message, which was delivered to two dozen lawmakers and the Pentagon, was simple. Okinawans want the Obama administration to cancel an agreement with the

conservative government of [Abe Shinzo](#) to build the new base on reclaimed land on a coral-rich bay on the northern coast of Okinawa. Over 80 percent of Okinawans oppose the new base in Henoko, according to recent polls, and they now have the support of the island’s entire elected leadership.

“The military occupation of Okinawa has been the policy of the United States for over 70 years,” Yasutomi Nobutake, a member of the Kin town assembly, told me. He was angry and disappointed to see the Obama administration support Abe and the Pentagon against the wishes of the Okinawan people. “This is not the democracy the United States boasts about,” he said.

The opposition movement presents a quandary to the U.S. government, which has been intensifying its military relationship with Japan as part of its “Asia Pivot.” As I [wrote](#) in *The Nation* earlier this year,

The protests in Okinawa are aimed squarely at one of the keystones of American foreign policy in Asia: a forward US base on the Pacific Rim that’s been used since the Korean War to project American power from Vietnam to the Middle East. Okinawa is home to 19,000 US Marines and dozens of US military installations that include the Marines’ only jungle training center.

Last month, in an excellent series about Okinawa, a reporter for McClatchy [wrote about](#) the stakes for the Marines:

The impasse is so entrenched that the U.S. is preparing to spend \$145 million to improve an air base on Okinawa that has been marked for closure since 1996. The money will buy essential repairs to keep safe a fleet of 24 V-22 Osprey planes that cost about \$60 million each, said Col. Peter Lee, the base's commander.

For Okinawans, however, the bases on their land are a social, safety and environmental hazard and they are angry at Japanese discriminatory treatment that places the vast majority of bases in Okinawa. The Marine Corps Air Station at Futenma, for example, is known to locals as "the most dangerous base in the world" because it is completely surrounded by a city with 96,000 residents. Planes and jets roar overhead 24 hours a day, shaking windows and rattling nerves, particularly in nearby schools.

Over the years, dozens of aircraft and automobile accidents have caused injury and death to local residents and US soldiers. In 2004, a U.S. helicopter crashed and exploded into a building at Okinawa International University near Futenma, sparking the largest anti-base demonstrations in a decade.

As [documented](#) by the Welsh journalist Jon Mitchell, toxic levels of dioxin and Agent Orange were stored for decades at Kadena Air Base and other installations with zero notice to residents. The new base planned for Henoko Bay, Okinawans fear, will severely damage coral reefs, devastate local marine life and wreck the last feeding grounds of the dugong, an endangered species. And for decades, girls and women have been subjected to rapes and

assault from U.S. soldiers.

"We want Americans to understand the reality we face every day in Okinawa," said Tamaki Ai, a university student and a member of the council. "These bases are not there for justice."

In an interview, Ms. Tamaki told me she became active in the anti-base movement after learning that a 12-year old girl raped in 1995 by three U.S. soldiers came from her hometown. That incident led to massive protests throughout Japan and forced the United States and its longtime ally to come to grips with American military domination of the island.

One of the leaders of those protests, Takazato Suzuyo, was the co-chair of the Okinawa delegation to Washington. She's well known for organizing the island's first rape crisis center to provide counseling to victims of sexual violence.

"Our goal is to support the governor as much as possible" by demanding an end to base expansion, she said.

Under the 1995 agreement, the Pentagon agreed to close the Futenma Marine base, but only if Japan allowed it to construct a new base at Henoko Bay in the northern part of the island. If it's built, Okinawans claim, the base will cause serious destruction to the fragile, coral-filled marine environment.

The situation began heating up in 2014, when anti-base candidates captured the governor's office and all four seats held by Okinawa in the Japanese House of Representatives. In October 2015, Onaga Takeshi, the new governor and a long-time member of the Liberal Democratic Party, revoked the land reclamation approval for Henoko that was granted by his predecessor. That decision made the construction and related work on the base illegal. It also set up the current confrontation with the Abe administration that's playing out

in [daily protests](#) outside the U.S. bases.

At first, the central government called a temporary halt to the reclamation process at Henoko, which involves testing the seabed to prepare for the construction of two large runways that will jut into Oura Bay. But in late October, Abe's administration suspended the governor's revocation, and on November 12 resumed the drilling surveys. It has since sued Governor Onaga to overturn his decision to revoke the permits, and in recent days has sent riot police and coast guard ships to contain and disrupt the peaceful but determined protests.

"Abe is acting very forcefully" in Henoko, said Goya Morimasa, the leader of the delegation and chairman of the Kanehide Group, one of Okinawa's largest business groups. "He is using state power to take away Onaga's authority as governor."

The Pentagon and the Obama administration have tried to place themselves above the fray. They call the Henoko plan a "done deal" and a domestic decision between the central government and the governor. But Okinawans complain that, despite the unresolved legal dispute, the Department of Defense continues to issue "entrance permits" to Japanese officials and construction firms to enter the drilling site at Henoko. The DoD has jurisdiction because the site is located on the grounds of Camp Schwab, another U.S. Marine base.

"The U.S. government is not a bystander in this situation," Yoshikawa Hideki, a professor of anthropology, said at a press conference for Japanese media on November 20. "It acts like it has nothing to do with these decisions."

During its meetings on Capitol Hill, the Council urged the Pentagon to stop issuing permits while the Japanese courts consider the lawsuit filed by the Abe administration against Governor Onaga. While the trial is underway, "the U.S. should not support the construction

project," said Mr. Yoshikawa. A [statement](#) distributed by the Council added:

First, we call upon the U.S. government to acknowledge and respect the fact that the democratic voice of the people of Okinawa, manifested in the form of repeated elections, resolutions by the Prefectural Assembly, mass rallies, public forums, sit-ins, and now civil disobedience, unequivocally opposes the construction plan.

Second, we call upon the U.S. government to acknowledge that the U.S. DoD is actively complicit in the ongoing moves towards base construction by its issue of entrance permits to the Okinawa Defense Bureau for construction purposes.

To resolve the situation, the Council stated:

An alternative plan has to be sought by both the U.S. and Japanese governments while steps are urgently called for to close the U.S. Marine Air Station Futenma.

The visit by the delegation coincided with the first U.S. showing of "[The Afterburn](#)," a new film about Okinawa and its relationship with the United States. John Junkerman, an American writer and filmmaker who has lived in Tokyo for many years, directed it.

Drawing on archival footage from the National Archives and interviews with peace activists and U.S. military veterans in Okinawa, Junkerman's film explores a story that has largely been hidden from the U.S. and Japanese public but is deadly serious to the people of

Okinawa.

The United States captured Okinawa in 1945 after of the bloodiest battles of World War II. Over 240,000 people perished, including over 150,000 Okinawans - a quarter of its population. Among them were hundreds of so-called “comfort women,” who were forced into sexual slavery by the Japanese Army and stationed everywhere its troops fought throughout the Asia-Pacific. Immediately after the battle, U.S. forces occupied the island and began clearing villages for U.S. Air Force and Marine bases that would later be used extensively during the Korean and Vietnam wars.

“We were treated as spoils of war,” one Okinawan says of the occupation.

Some of the scenes depicted in the film are devastating. Thousands of Japanese soldiers, for example, were forced out of hiding and killed by napalm sprayed from cannons by U.S. soldiers. “We prayed: spare us from death from those flamethrowers,” one Japanese soldier recalls. The memories of the horror are still fresh to a U.S. veteran interviewed in the film. “It’s a sickening sight, and it never leaves you, John, it never leaves you,” he says sadly to the filmmaker.

“The Afterburn” focuses extensively on the predatory behavior of U.S. troops in Okinawa that has caused such intense anger on the island. In 1955, for example, a 6-year old girl was raped and murdered by a U.S. soldier who was never tried for his crime. Junkerman documents how U.S. soldiers first mistreated Okinawan women in 1853, when they were stationed on the island after Commodore Matthew Perry forced Japan to allow the U.S. Navy to open a logistics base there.

“The behavior of some American troops hasn’t changed over 162 years,” Junkerman notes sardonically in the film. Asked later why this might be true, he replied: “it’s the attitude of

being an occupier, and the feeling of privilege.” Ms. Tamaki, the university student, agreed. Despite the many incidents of rape and violence, “we still see U.S. soldiers hanging out and talking to local women,” she told me.

Before traveling to Washington, the All-Okinawa Council stopped in Berkeley, California, where the city council recently passed a resolution protesting the “lack of democratic process over the siting of the base in Okinawa” and asking Congress to address the environmental and political issues surrounding the Henoko base. While in Washington, the delegation met with congressional offices, environmental groups and a representative of the AFL-CIO.

The [labor visit](#) was made possible by the Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance, which recently passed its own resolution “in solidarity with the people of Okinawa in opposing the expansion of the U.S. military bases.” Among the participants were Cathy Feingold, the AFL-CIO’s director of international affairs. According to the *Ryukyu Shimpo*, she explained that “the AFL-CIO places great importance on military base issues and the anti-nuclear movement,” and referenced the APALA resolution.

In response, Oshiro Norio, chairman of the Okinawa Trade Union Confederation, expressed hope that “the AFL-CIO will join our struggle.” At the press conference following the meeting, Goya, the businessman, said he was pleased by his reception at the labor federation. “As a businessman I’m usually on the opposite side of workers,” he laughed. “But on this issue, we must come together and fight for democracy and peace.”

That remains to be seen. Over the last few years, the AFL-CIO has taken far more progressive positions on international issues than it did during the Cold War, when it [often acted as the labor shock troops](#) on behalf of the U.S. empire. This was particularly true in

Okinawa, as I learned a few years ago when I researched the AFL-CIO archives to learn more about the federation's role in the U.S. destabilization of Chile in 1973. I was shocked by what I found about Okinawa. Here's how I reported the story for [The Nation in 2003](#):

During the Indochina war, US bases on the island of Okinawa were used by the US military to store nuclear weapons and to launch B-52 strikes on Vietnam. This infuriated the citizens of Okinawa as well as many Japanese, sparking the political unrest that culminated in the 1972 reversion of Okinawa to Japanese control. But in 1967 and again in 1969, labor tensions in Okinawa boiled over, first after a military base workers' union known as Zengunro called a general strike to protest Okinawa's role in the war, and then when a new labor code imposed by Washington banned strikes on US bases and threatened strikers with severe punishment. The AFL-CIO became directly involved in stifling Okinawan resistance.

In April 1967 F.T. Unger, the US Army's High Commissioner in Okinawa, wrote a letter to AFL-CIO head George Meany informing him that Zengunro "has veered considerably" toward the "opposition reversion movement." He asked Meany to send an AFL-CIO staffer to Okinawa because "the Zengunro leadership needs a firm yet reassuring hand to protect them from the hotheads." A year later, Meany's representative in Okinawa warned his boss of the dangers to US interests presented

by the election of a prominent leader of the reversion movement—who was also a member of the local teachers' union—as Okinawa's first chief executive. Japanese leftists, he complained, were calling the election "a mandate for immediate unconditional reversion, removal of all US military bases and ultimate abrogation of the Japanese-US Mutual Security Treaty in 1970"—developments anathema to the AFL-CIO.

The general strike in February 1969 infuriated Meany and his staff, particularly because it was endorsed by Domei, the conservative Japanese labor federation aligned with the AFL-CIO. In a memo to Meany, his international affairs director, Ernest Lee, warned that the strike was "primarily against the US government authority on the island as well as US foreign policy" and "could affect our Vietnamese effort and support a communist offensive in Vietnam." Lee became livid when he learned that Victor Reuther, international affairs director of the UAW and one of the few labor leaders who challenged AFL-CIO foreign policy, was openly backing the Okinawa base workers. Reuther's telegram of support to Okinawa, Lee told his boss, "is one of the encouragements upon which [Japanese trade unionists] will lean" during the strike. He added, "I believe that both State and Defense should be aware of that cable." Turning in one of America's most respected labor leaders to the Pentagon surely ranks as a low

point in AFL-CIO history.

If anything, this sordid history underscores the colonial attitude that Americans have held toward Okinawa since 1945. Winning U.S. support for democratic rights and opposition to a new base in a land that has lived with the overwhelming US base presence for seven decades.

Click [here](#) for information about John Junkerman's film, "Okinawa: The Afterburn."

Epilogue: The All-Okinawa Council Mission to the U.S. by Steve Rabson

The All-Okinawa Council, which visited the U.S. from November 15-21, was the third delegation from Okinawa to the U.S. in 2015 for the purpose of conveying overwhelming opposition in the prefecture to construction of the planned Marine airbase at Henoko. Former Governor Ota began making such visits in the 1990's to appeal for overall reduction of the disproportionate U.S. military presence in Okinawa. In April, 2015, National Diet member Denny Tamaki led a delegation meeting with members of Congress. They were able to convey opposition in Okinawa to the airbase in these meetings and at press conferences despite the fact that one member, Madelaine Z. Bordallo of Guam, stated frankly that she supported base construction in Henoko because it would ensure the proposed movement of 8,000 Marines from Okinawa to Guam, which she believed would benefit the island's economy. Then, in late May, Governor Onaga Takeshi brought his senior staff and elected municipal officials to Washington, including Nago Mayor Inamine Susumu who had led an earlier visit to New York and Washington in 2014. Senator John McCain reportedly refused to meet this year with delegations from Okinawa because he felt betrayed, after strongly opposing the airbase in Congress as the ranking member of the Armed

Services Committee, when former Governor Nakaima signed the landfill permit for its construction under pressure from the central government.

Other problems encountered by the latest delegation can serve as lessons for future visits. The message they delivered was intended for Congress, the Defense Department, and the American people. They were able to meet with several Congressional staff members who carefully made notes on their presentations and seemed sympathetic as they listened. A key request was for the Pentagon to stop issuing entry permits to construction crews coming with trucks and equipment into the Marines' Camp Schwab where the airbase is planned. However, delegation members acknowledged they had been unable to meet with anyone from the Defense Department. The newly established Okinawa Prefectural Government's Washington office participated in none of the delegation's activities, continuing a pattern of distancing from Governor Onaga's demand to halt base construction. The staff there had earlier given the cold shoulder to D.C. area residents who tried to visit their office in support of Governor Onaga's earlier delegation opposing the base. They were quickly escorted out of the office and prohibited even from sitting in the coffee lounge intended for visitors to all offices on that floor of the building.

Undoubtedly, the All Okinawa delegation's greatest success was informing the public, through the American and Japanese media, of violations of democracy and human rights long-perpetuated by the U.S. military presence in Okinawa and shining a light on the injustice of concentration of bases on the island. Large audiences attended the screenings of John Junkerman's new Okinawa film "The Afterburn" and the informational sessions and press conferences held in Berkeley, California and Washington, D.C. The result was media coverage of the visits to both cities.



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