

The People of Okinawa Stand Up for Women's Rights and Peace

Yoshikawa Hideki

Abstract: 2,500 noble citizens came together on the 22nd of December in Okinawa Prefecture, Japan to raise their voices against the recent increase in sexual crimes committed by U.S. military personnel against local women and children, members of a community that U.S. soldiers are supposed to defend. The rally arguably marked a significant day in Japan for the women's rights movement, a movement that protects women and children by sounding the alarm and ending the silence that has surrounded sexual assault. The day should also be remembered as an interesting moment in Okinawa's lively peace movement. Given that only a few Japanese journalists reported about the action that day in English, and while U.S. journalists maintained their usual silence about their compatriots' crimes, it is important that we have this report from the diligent peace and human rights defender Yoshikawa Hideki documenting the struggle for the traumatized victims and for the future safety of people in Okinawa and in Japan generally.

Keywords: Okinawa, Women's rights, Protest, Sexual assault, Rally

I attended a rally for women's rights and peace on Sunday the 22nd of December in Okinawa against the series of sexual assaults that U.S. military personnel committed in 2024 against women and girls.¹

2,500 people participated at the Okinawa City Civic Center. Many others participated in satellite rallies held on the islands of Ishigaki and Miyako, as well as in Tokyo, Osaka, and other cities.

Since the hall at the Okinawa City Civic Center was not large enough to hold all the people who gathered to listen and participate, many people had to stand in the lobby watching and listening to the speeches via a screen. Douglas Lummis, who is a former professor at Tsuda College, scholar of political science, and former U.S. Marine, and I were outside the hall, listening to the speeches via a speaker or watching the rally on our smartphones, along with many others.

The Okinawa Interest Group's message was posted in the lobby, and many people stopped to carefully read it. (The Group's message appears in English and Japanese below). There were two other interesting statements posted in the lobby, one from the Okinawa Peace Seminar of High School Students and another from the Nagano Prefectural Teachers Union.

I appreciated the message from the Okinawa Peace Seminar of High School Students. It strongly condemned the sexual violence committed by U.S. military personnel against the people of Okinawa. It also made a critical observation about the current attitudes of the Okinawan people toward these crimes, as well as their relationship with the U.S. military and the Japanese government.

Their message warned that "the reaction by Okinawan society to this seems to be less strong than in the past" and that "there is a feeling of hesitation in society today to even raise our voices to protect peace and human rights. It seems as if the U.S.

¹ Yamaguchi Mari. 2024. "Japan protests sex assault cases involving US military on Okinawa and their delayed disclosure." *AP News*, 28 June. <https://apnews.com/article/japan-us-military-sexual-assault-okinawa-93df092f43e2494d122b562145f10956>

military and the Japanese government are waiting for us to stop speaking out.”

I believe that it is essential for adults in Okinawa to take this message to heart so that we can be more vocal and more visible, and so that younger people will speak out.



Figure 1. Many people were standing outside the hall due to the fact that the number of attendees greatly exceeded the maximum seating capacity.



Figure 2. Attendees read about the history of sexual assaults and other types of crimes committed by U.S. military personnel and took photos.

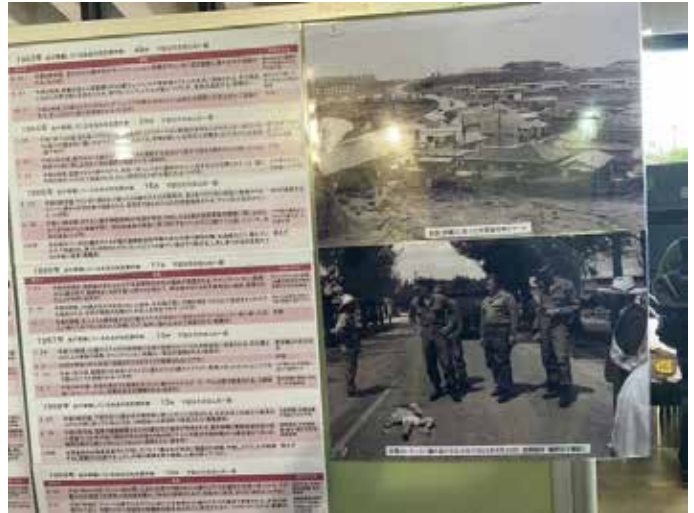


Figure 3. The text on the left tells some of the history of crimes committed by U.S. military personnel against people in Okinawa, especially sexual assaults. On the right we see two photos, one of a U.S. military base and the other of a girl who was killed when she was struck by a U.S. military truck.

Author Hideki Yoshikawa and editor Joseph Essertier are both members of the Okinawa Interest Group, whose statement is below.

Statement in English:

Message for Kenmin Taikai 22 December 2024

Today we send this message to you as members of the Okinawa Interest Group. We publish articles about Okinawa, translate Okinawan literature, and take actions to stop the U.S. and Japanese military buildup in Okinawa. In 2024, we held two international webinars on Okinawa—one about the ongoing military colonization of Okinawa, and one about sexual crimes committed by U.S. military personnel in Okinawa and these crimes being covered up.

The most recent sexual assaults by U.S. forces, including one on a child a few months ago, are just the latest in a never-ending series dating back to the arrival of the U.S. military in Okinawa in 1945. In

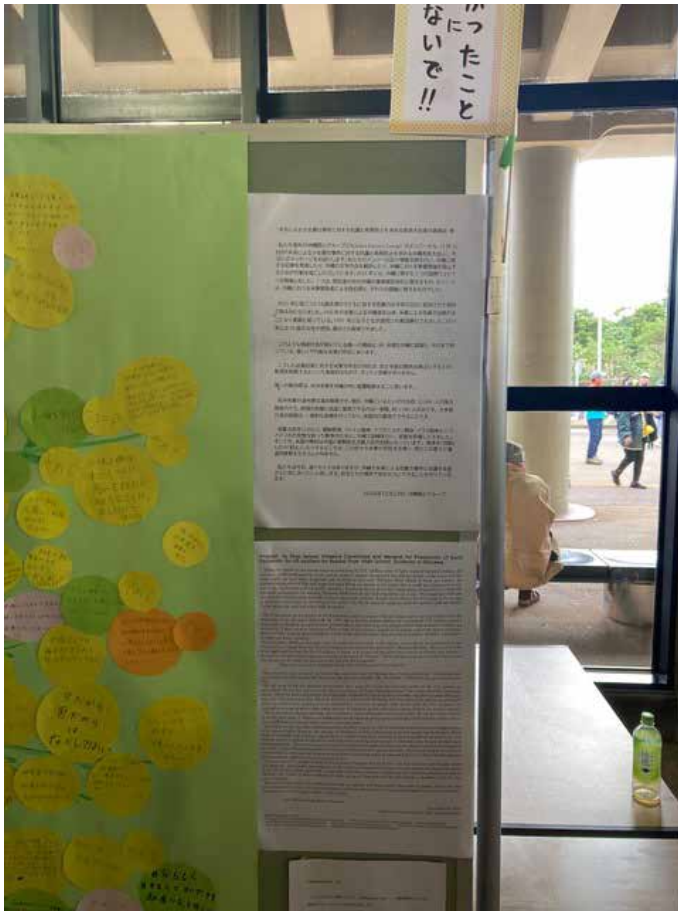


Figure 4. One of the papers on the right is the statement from the Okinawa Interest Group in English and another is the statement in Japanese. On the left are messages such as “Protect human rights” that junior high school students wrote on yellow, green, orange, and pink paper.

1995 a child was kidnapped and gang-raped; and in 2016 a 20-year-old woman was abducted, raped, and murdered.

The sole reason for these continuing atrocities is the grossly disproportionate American military presence that has remained in Okinawa for eight decades and continues to this day.

The cosmetic responses of U.S. commanders to these heinous crimes, such as confining soldiers to their bases for a few days or restricting their alcohol consumption, have been completely ineffective.



Figure 5. The red flag on the right is a *nobori* flag of the New Japan Women’s Association (*Shin Nihon Fujin no Kai*). The green and white flag in the middle is the Okinawa University Student Union (*jichi kai*). The banner between these flags is for the Korean people fighting against the administration of South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol and his declaration of martial law. The banner to the left of the green and white flag calls for solidarity with South Korean people to break the Japan-U.S.-South Korea military alliance and stop any military invasion of China.

The only solution is to reassign most of them out of the prefecture.

The vast majority are Marines. They are here not to defend Japan, but to train. Currently, of the approximately 15,000 Marines in Okinawa, only one brigade, about 2,000, are capable of rapid deployment in a regional crisis. The rest conduct general-purpose training exercises they could just as well carry out at bases in the United States.

Over the years U.S forces have trained and stored weapons in Okinawa for America’s tragically misguided wars in Korea, Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq. Now their targets are China and the DPRK. Far from “defending” against or “detering” war, this



Figure 6. The *nobori* flag in the center of this photo was raised outside the civic hall and it is from Iejima Island’s Wabiai no Sato Foundation, who run the museum Nuchidou Takara no Ie (“The House of ‘Life is a Treasure’”) that the “Gandhi of Okinawa,” Ahagon Shoko (1901-2002), established. The flag reads, “The biggest enemy of peace is indifference, and the biggest friend of war is also indifference.”

massive presence is much more likely to bring catastrophic devastation to these islands once again.

We reach out today to declare our solidarity with those attending the rally and protesting incidents of sexual violence by the U.S. military.

Japanese translation of statement:

米兵による少女暴行事件に対する抗議と再発防止を求める県民大会実行委員会様

私たち海外の沖縄関心グループ(Okinawa Interest Group)のメンバーから、12月22日の「米兵による少女暴行事件に対する抗議と再発防止を求める沖縄県民大会」に、今日このメッセージをお送りします。私たちのメンバーは日々情報交換を行い、沖縄に関する記事を発表したり、沖縄の文学作品を翻訳したり、沖縄における軍備増強を阻止するための行動を起こしたりしています。2024年には、沖縄に関する



Figure 7. This is a photo of the last page of the *Okinawa Times* that was bravely issued on 23 December 2024, the day after the rally. It is a list of heinous crimes, rapes, sexual violence, and murders committed by U.S. military personnel against Okinawans, Japanese, and others in Okinawa from 1945 to 2024.

2つの国際ウェビナーを開催しました。1つは、現在進行中の沖縄の軍事植民地化に関するもの、もう1つは、沖縄における米軍関係者による性犯罪と、それらの隠蔽に関するものでした。

2023年に起こった16歳未満の子どもに対する性暴力は今年の3月に起訴されて初めて明るみになりました。1945年の米軍による沖縄侵攻以来、米軍による性暴力は終わることなく連綿と続いている。1995年には子どもが誘拐され集団暴行されました。2016年には20歳の女性が誘拐、暴行され殺害されました。

このような残虐行為が続いている唯一の理由は、80年間も沖縄に駐留し、今日まで続いている、著しく不均衡な米軍の存在にあります。

こうした凶悪犯罪に対する米軍司令官の対応は、兵士を数日間外出禁止にするとか、飲酒を制限するといった表面的なもので、まったく効果がありません。

唯一の解決策は、在沖米軍を沖縄の外に配置転換することだと思います。

在沖米軍の過半数は海兵隊員です。現在、沖縄にいるといわれる約15,000人の海兵隊員のうち、地域の危機に迅速に展開できるのは一部隊、約2,000人のみです。大多数の海兵隊員は、一般的な訓練を行っており、米国内の基地でできることです。

米軍は長年にわたり、朝鮮戦争、ベトナム戦争、アフガニスタン戦争、イラク戦争というアメリカの悲惨な誤った戦争のために、沖縄で訓練を行い、武器を貯蔵してきました。そして今、米国の標的は中国と朝鮮民主主義人民共和国となっています。戦争を「防衛」したり「抑止」したりするどころか、この巨大な米軍が存在する限り、再びこの島々に壊滅的被害をもたらしかねません。

私たちは今日、遠くからではありますが、沖縄で米軍による性暴力事件に抗議する皆さんと共にありたいと思います。自分たちの場所で自分たちにできることをやっていきます。

2024年12月22日 沖縄関心グループ

Written by Hideki Yoshikawa, Director of the Okinawa Environmental Justice Project (<https://okinawae-justice.jp.blogspot.com/>). Edited by Joseph Essertier.

About the Author

Yoshikawa Hideki is an anthropologist at Meio University and the University of the Ryukyus, International Director of the Save the Dugong Campaign Center, and Director of the Okinawa Environmental Justice Project. He is the author of several major articles at Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus. He resides in Nago City.