

On the occasion of the 75th anniversary of the Battle of Okinawa, 60 years since entry into force of the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty and Status of Forces Agreement, and 48th year since Okinawa's return to Japan:

Struggle against new U.S. base construction in Henoko and for realization of "Nuchidu takara"

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For achieving "Nuchidu takara" in Okinawa where one out of every four residents died in the Battle of Okinawa

In 1945, the Japanese Army and the U.S.-led Allied Forces fought a fierce battle in Okinawa, resulting in the deaths of more than 200,000 people on both sides. More than 120,000 Okinawans, or one out of every four residents, lost their lives in this tragic war. With their pledge to never let their land become a battlefield again, Okinawans have expressed their wish for peace in the Okinawan phrase "Nuchidu takara (life is a treasure)" and opposed everything that leads to war.

However, following its victory in the Battle of Okinawa, the U.S. built military bases in Okinawa in order to attack Japan's mainland, while it confined Okinawan residents in concentration camps. It forcibly took land away from local residents and turned it into military bases in violation of the Hague Convention Respecting the Laws and Customs of War on Land. With the San Francisco Peace Treaty coming into force in 1952, Okinawa was separated from Japan and placed under the rule of the U.S. military, which treated Okinawa as its colony and severely restricted residents' rights. But Okinawans put up an island-wide struggle and resisted the U.S. forces' attempt to take away more land and turn Okinawa into an "unsinkable aircraft carrier in the Pacific". This struggle developed into a movement calling for Okinawa's reversion to Japan and, on May 15, 1972, Okinawa was finally returned to Japan.

Snatched land "offered" to U.S. forces, colonial rule turned into SOFA

The people of Okinawa had believed that returning to Japan would realize a "nuclear- and bases-free, peaceful Okinawa". However, U.S. bases built on residents' stolen land became facilities the Japanese government "offered" to the U.S. forces by forcibly leasing the land from the residents. Due to the Japan-U.S. Status of Forces Agreement, the colonial rule by the U.S. military only became "double rules" in which the Japanese government disregards Okinawans' human rights and condones "privileged treatment" of the U.S. forces. Today, Okinawans are still suffering from damage caused by U.S. bases and continue to be threatened by crimes and accidents involving U.S. military personnel. SOFA-related issues continue to arise, such as contamination with organic fluorine compounds called PFOS and the spread of novel coronavirus cases from U.S. military personnel.

Base construction in Henoko triggered by rape of 12-year-old girl

The construction of a new U.S. base in Henoko, which is now at the center of our struggles in Okinawa, was triggered by a crime committed by U.S. servicemen. Okinawans' anger reached its peak when three U.S. marines raped a 12-year-old girl in 1995. Fearing that it would escalate into a massive anti-base campaign, the U.S. tried to calm the situation by unconditionally returning the Futenma base in Ginowan City, which is said to be the world's most dangerous airport. However, once again, the Japanese government replaced the plan with a conditional return involving relocation of the base within the prefecture. After several changes of the construction plan, the current "V-shaped runway" plan was confirmed, and in July 2014, the Abe administration began the construction of a new military base in Henoko.

Forcibly building base in areas where it should never be built

Since the construction of the new base was forcibly started, several facts have come to light. One of them is that the height of buildings around a runway of the base violate regulations under Japan's aviation law and do not even meet more relaxed standards set by the U.S. Department of Defense. In areas around the Henoko district, houses, elementary and junior high school buildings, as well as some parts of the Henoko Ammunition Depot exceed the height limitation. The scale of damage in the event of a crash is unimaginable.

Also, a soft seafloor was found to exist at the construction site in Oura Bay. In January last year, Japan's Defense Ministry acknowledged that the seafloor at 90 meters below the water surface is soft as mayonnaise and announced that it will conduct soil stabilization work. However, such work has never been carried out beyond 70 meters in depth, and currently there is no work vessel capable of working on the ground deeper than that. In other words, it is impossible to conduct soil stabilization work for a seafloor deeper than 70 meters.

Furthermore, issues of active faults in Oura Bay have been revealed. Niigata University Professor Emeritus Tateishi, who has been researching faults in Oura Bay, announced that his field investigation has increased suspicion that the two faults in the bay are both active. Tateishi's group studied data related to the soft seafloor and pointed out that if embankment work is carried out there without improving the unstable seafloor deeper than 70 meters, the entire ground may collapse. Since it is impossible to improve the deepest area of the seafloor of Oura Bay, the new base construction will never be completed. But the construction work continues in the area where the base should never be built, and the building costs keep growing. I suspect that the Japanese and U.S. governments are only talking about "removing the Futenma base's danger as soon as possible" for appearances' sake and that they are continuing the construction work in order to have an excuse for the U.S. military to keep using the Futenma base.

"All-Okinawa" struggle encouraging residents

Okinawans' resistance has significantly delayed the construction of the new U.S. base in Henoko. It was initially planned to be in service in 2022, but based on the delivery of sand for landfill, it is estimated that only 2% of the construction has been completed so far. The driving force behind the resistance is the struggle Nago City residents have continued for more than 20

years since the announcement of the base relocation plan, sit-in protests in front of a Camp Schwab gate, on-the-sea protests continuing since the start of the construction, and the prefecture-wide struggle organized by the “all-Okinawa” forces led by the late Governor Onaga Takeshi and current Governor Tamaki Denny. One year ago, 500 to 600 construction vehicles passed through the Henoko construction gate every day, but the number has decreased now to 150 to 200. Most of the vehicles are carrying materials for breakwaters and seawalls. Currently, other than pouring sand into the landfill area, no work can be done until the improvement of the soft seafloor is completed.

To block Henoko base construction

A lawsuit filed by the Okinawa prefectural government against the national government continues for a withdrawal of the approval of the landfill work in Henoko. The Okinawa Defense Bureau submitted to the prefectural government an application for a change of the construction design. Since Governor Tamaki has no intention of approving it, a new court struggle is expected to begin. In its application, the Okinawa Defense Bureau made clear that it plans to procure most of the landfill sand from various parts in Okinawa, including Itoman City and Yaese Town, where many residents lost their lives during the Battle of Okinawa. Carving the land stained with blood of the war victims and using it to build a new military base is the worst form of desecration to them. Okinawans will never allow such an outrage.

Former Okinawa Governor Onaga risked his life to confront the Abe administration and departed along the way. But his will has been carried on by his successor Governor Tamaki. He has been actively working to raise awareness about the Henoko base issue by visiting the U.S. to directly talk to not only government officials but also citizens, as well as conducting a nationwide tour in Japan. Thanks to these efforts, the Henoko base issue has gained international attention. An online petition to be sent to the White House launched by a third-generation Okinawan living in Hawaii was widely covered in the news. In October last year, coastal waters of Henoko/Oura Bay were designated as Japan’s first “Hope Spot” by an NPO of the U.S.

Through our struggle for the return of Okinawa to Japan, we were able to unite with our fellow Japanese people nationwide and realize the reversion. I believe that we will be able to block the base construction in Henoko by building solidarity with people internationally who are calling for a peaceful world.

I conclude my speech by pledging to continue to fight in solidarity with all of you who have joined in this World Conference against A & H Bombs held online.

Okinawans never give up until we win. Let us work together.