

INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

How Long Must Okinawans Wait?

by Allen Mendenhall *January 11, 2011*

Washington officials continue to ignore the residents of Okinawa, a small island south of Japan. A poll from last summer revealed that over 70% of Okinawans want America's Futenma military base relocated off the island

entirely. Although Japanese Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama had promised to thwart US efforts to relocate the base to another part of the island, he was forced to resign in June of last year after failing to persuade the Obama Administration.

Hatoyama, who studied engineering at Stanford, was no enemy of the United States. He met regularly with American officials and personally voiced his concerns about Futenma to President Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. His rapid rise in popularity reversed quickly when news came out about his administration's financial scandals and when he failed to follow through with his promises to relocate Futenma outside Okinawa, if not outside Japan entirely.

Hatoyama insisted he would stake his career on the Futenma issue, and he did. His political career is over. The only high-ranking Japanese or South Korean leader who openly challenged Obama and his military plans for the region is now gone.

Hatoyama's successor, Prime Minister Naoto Kan, sought to ease tensions over the Futenma issue that Obama and Hatoyama had supposedly resolved. In late December, he purportedly told Okinawa governor Hirokazu Nakaima—an anti-Futenma activist—that he wanted to lower taxes and promote tourism in Okinawa. He explained that Japan's central government would implement subsidies and raise funds to assist Okinawa during her time of political unrest.

On New Year's Day, however, the Japanese government told Okinawans it would not entertain local residents'

"Apparently lost on US military



opinions about Futenma's relocation. With this announcement, Kan, Japan's fifth prime minister in four years, undermined his already waning popularity and called into question his ability to appease Okinawans.

Japan began discussions with South Korea last week to address a possible Japan-South Korea alliance to share military goods and services. The mere appearance of cooperation between these two nations could validate their leadership by giving the impression that America is not in charge. Both nations host US military facilities and have foreign-policy agendas that, in Asia at least, are in lockstep with Obama's.

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The hundreds of islands comprising the Okinawa Prefecture are not that close to the Japanese mainland. Okinawa Island is nearly 1000 miles from Tokyo. The Japan Self-Defense Forces (calling them a "military" is inaccurate since the Japanese Constitution forbids the use of military force) would likely be the first responders to any act of military aggression against Japan.

Although the US claims its presence in Okinawa deters conflict in Asia, it is just as likely that its presence provokes conflict. Despite the US military presence in Okinawa and nearby South Korea, Chinese submarines and warships have continued and will continue to harass the Japanese over the Senkaku Islands. North Korea will continue to harass South Korea and to lob missiles over Japan and into the Pacific. The US presence has not prevented these events from happening in the past, nor have US forces done anything that South Korean or Japanese forces could not do on their own.

Although the US military claims that it boosts the Okinawan economy, we do not know what the Okinawan economy would look like without the US military there. Tourism might thrive when foreign troops aren't running around and American bases no longer occupy prime beachfront real estate. What we do know is that Okinawans are willing to sacrifice whatever economic benefits they enjoy from US bases simply to be rid of them. Their message: "Just leave."

US troops conduct community-outreach projects that include assisting Okinawans in their Special Olympics programs, but such do-gooding has not convinced Okinawans of our noble intentions. That is not surprising, since one outreach project is to invite Okinawans to the base to join the troops' Fourth of July celebrations. Apparently lost on US military leaders is the irony of inviting an occupied people to partake in their occupier's Independence Day festivities.

On top of this, *The Telegraph* reported last week that US soldiers on Okinawa are compromising security by selling guided tours of the base. Until American troops on Okinawa learn how to behave—they



have a long history of criminal activity on the island, including 1995's notorious group **raping** of a 12-year-old girl—American media should be ruthless in its investigations of Futenma. Unfortunately, news about the Okinawa base is usually buried in newspapers' middle pages, if it reaches newspapers at all.

Okinawans do not want US bases on their islands. The US military has other potential locations for such bases, including Guam, a US territory whose residents **want** to host them. Why won't we leave the Okinawans alone and give the Guamanians, our "sort-of" fellow Americans, what they want?

Unless Obama knows something that we do not, then he, as a Nobel Peace Prize winner and the leader of the once-free world, should withdraw our military from an island that can no longer stand our presence and is tired of our officials telling her what to do.

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Thank you, Mr. Mendenhall, for this article and for being one of the few that says anything about this topic. The Okinawans don't want us, need us, and we can no longer afford to have all these imperial bases.

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