

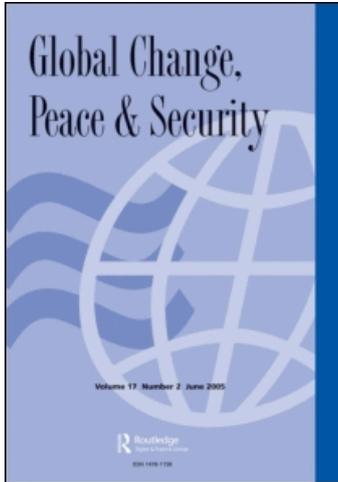
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COMMUNICATION

Protecting the right to live peacefully: a report from Takae, Okinawa

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A sit-in protest in Takae, an outlying Japanese district

The round-the-clock sit-in protest by the Takae residents against the construction of US military helipads in their area continues to this day. The planned helipads are to be built around Takae, an area that is close to the US Marine Corps' Jungle Warfare Training Center (the Northern Training Area), which covers 7500 hectares. Takae provides the best environment for training the US military in survival skills. The training center is the only US Marine training center of its kind in the world. Since 2 July 2007, the sit-in protesters have been strongly demanding that the construction of the helipads be stopped; their primary objection is that the presence of these helipads will disrupt the peaceful life of Takae's local residents. The construction of the military infrastructure has begun despite the non-fulfillment of legal requirements, such as obtaining an environmental impact assessment.

Takae is located in the northern part of a tiny village called Higashi-son in the Kunigami-gun area of Okinawa Prefecture. It takes more than three hours by bus to get there from Naha, the capital of Okinawa. Takae has a population of around one hundred and sixty, and 20% of the population consists of children of junior high school age or under. The local people are very proud of Takae's beautiful, subtropical environment and call their neighborhood the 'oriental Galapagos', or *yanbaru*, which, in the local Okinawan dialect, means the region of mountains and forests in northern Okinawa. The subtropical environment is recognized as an important habitat for several local species of birds, reptiles, and mammals, including the Okinawa woodpecker and the Okinawa rail. According to WWF Japan, the area serves as the habitat for more than four thousand wildlife species, of which 11 indigenous animals and 12 indigenous plants are unique and thus cannot be found anywhere else in the world.¹

The following quotation from a member of Takae's local environmental protection group gives us an insight into the daily lives of the inhabitants of the district:

From olden times the people of Takae have lived a modest lifestyle, in tune with nature, next to the river which connects the mountains with the ocean. They catch fish and exchange vegetables ... sitting on the riverbank and listening to the power of nature in all its iridescent beauty.²

The pteridophyte grows thick in this area, and one can feel as if one is truly in the midst of a jungle. The biodiversity of the animals and plants in this jungle has prompted the Japanese

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1 WWF Japan (World Wide Fund for Nature Japan), 'We Demand an End to the Helipad Construction in the US Armed Forces Northern Training Area', July 14, 2007, <http://www.wwf.or.jp/activities/2007/06/651814.html#eng> (accessed March 24, 2010).

2 Burokkori no mori o mamoru kai, *Voice of Takae from Okinawa, Japan*, August 2007.

Ministry of the Environment in May 2005 to nominate the area as a World Heritage site candidate, a UNESCO-designated place that has cultural and physical significance with outstanding value to humanity. Thus, the area is a popular destination for those who are interested in ecotourism. Everything is indeed peaceful; except for the times when the roar of helicopters is heard. The construction of the US military helipads is threatening to disrupt the quiet everyday life of Takae's inhabitants.

US–Japan talk on Okinawa

In 1996, the Japanese and US governments set up the Special Action Committee on Facilities and Districts in Okinawa (SACO) as a platform to discuss the US military bases in Japan, which occupy more than one-third of mainland Okinawa. The discussion resulted in the Americans agreeing to return the Marine Corps Air Station Futenma, the most significant US presence in Okinawa, to Japan. This US air station sits astride the densely populated Ginowan-shi area of Okinawa. This arrangement can be viewed as a joint attempt to reduce the burden imposed by the US bases on Okinawa. In addition, the USA promised to return nearly half of the Northern Training Area (about four thousand hectares) to Okinawa. However, the return of this land – as agreed in 2006 – was conditional upon the construction of a replacement facility, with the same functions and capabilities as the Futenma base, in the district of Henoko, Nago-shi, next to Camp Schwab. This plan also called for the shifting by 2014 to the US territory of Guam of 8000 Marines and their 9000 family members currently residing in Okinawa. To help with the construction of this facility in Henoko, the two governments decided to construct six new helipads in the Takae district of Higashi-son, the forest adjacent to Henoko. This is in addition to the 15 helipads already in existence in Higashi-son.

These new American helipads, which are expected to be built in the Takae district, are to be the direct replacements for the helicopter-landing zone presently in existence at the Northern Training Area. The construction of the helipads (with a diameter of 75 meters) and introduction of a state-of-the-art Osprey VTOL (vertical take-off and landing aircraft) military training program is expected to seriously affect the lifestyle and living environment of the residents of Takae. The new Osprey helicopters are reportedly capable of flying five times the distance, carrying three times as much weight, and going twice as fast as the CH-46 helicopters that are currently used. According to a news report, the USA is in the process of increasing production of the new Osprey helicopters and hopes to replace all of its CH-46 helicopters as soon as possible.³

As of 25 April 2010, the helipad construction in Takae was stopped due to the continuing sit-in protest. During his campaign for the general election in the summer of 2009, Yukio Hatoyama, the former Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) premier, called for the relocation of the Futenma Air Station to somewhere outside Okinawa or even outside Japan. After the election, his government agreed with its coalition partners on the need to review the original plan made by the former government of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and Komei along with the previous Bush administration, to relocate the US forces and military bases currently in Japan. In May 2010, Hatoyama confirmed Henko as a venue for relocating the Futenma Air Station, in line with the abovementioned agreement with the United States in 2006. Meanwhile, concerned US officials, including Secretary of State Hillary Clinton as well as Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, have made it clear that the USA expects the implementation of the 2006 agreement between the Bush administration and the LDP-Komei government.

This additional burden weighs heavily upon the people residing in remote districts such as Takae and results in their having to face hardship. In fact, the ward chief of Takae said,

3 'Futenma shozokuhei, kunren de hongokuni, osupurei kennai haibi', *Ryukyuu Shimpo*, March 1, 2006.

There was a meeting to explain the findings of the environmental assessment . . . The issue of the protection of local species . . . was raised and given precedence, but there was no mention of the people who live in the area of the proposed helipads, the potential effect of the helipads on their living environment, or the noise pollution that would result from their presence.⁴

Takae is located in a mountainous region, a fact that magnifies the scale of the menace faced by its residents from the helipads. This is aptly reflected in the comment of one of the participants of the sit-in protest: 'The helicopters are so close that we can see, from inside our homes, the faces of the American pilots when they take off from the existing helipads'. Furthermore, the construction of the helipads would necessitate the deforestation of a large and hitherto untouched area of the *yanbaru* forest – a fact that may well affect a majority of the population of Okinawa prefecture. One major effect of this is the increased possibility of contamination of the reservoir in Takae, which is the chief source of drinking water across the prefecture.

Nonviolence: a message from Takae

On 25 November 2008, the Japan Defense Ministry's regional bureau in Okinawa filed a provisional disposition with the Naha District Court seeking the removal of 15 residents who were staging the sit-in protest against the construction of helipads for US military forces in Takae, on the grounds that they were obstructing traffic. The participants against whom the disposition was filed even included an eight-year-old girl who happened to be with her mother at the sit-in site. The clause concerning the child was later removed from the plea. However, the remaining 14 residents included some people who visited the sit-in site very rarely. After almost a year of court hearings, on 11 December 2009, the Naha District Court admitted a provisional disposition concerning two of the 14 residents. These two residents were leaders of the sit-in protest. On 29 January 2010, the Okinawa Defense Bureau filed a suit claiming that the two local habitants were obstructing traffic.⁵

On 19 March 2010, the first oral pleading was held in Naha. One of the defendants claimed that the sit-in action was just another social movement aiming to protect their ordinary lives and the natural environment surrounding them. To back up his claim, he pointed to the fact that the helipad closest to Takae was located only 300 meters away from his house. He claimed, 'The Defense Bureau is out to destroy my ordinary life'.⁶ The other defendant said, 'The state summoned me to court for obstructing the [helipad] construction, but I am only trying to protect my peaceful life'.⁷ The two local residents asked the court to reject the state's demand. In fact, throughout the sit-in protest, the local residents' group called *Herippado iranai Jūmin no kai* (roughly translated as 'the residents' group against the helipad'), which leads the sit-in protest, has consistently maintained that the action taken by the Okinawa Defense Bureau was aimed at suppressing their peaceful, everyday lives.⁸

Thus far (as of August 2010), the total number of people who have protested against the proposed construction of helipads in Takae has reached approximately ten thousand. They take turns spending time in the various tents set up at the four gates of the US military base. The gates are located around two or three kilometers from each other, which means that the protest requires the participation of a substantial number of people. When we joined the sit-in protest at one of the four gates to the US Jungle Warfare Training Center, we met both local residents and people who had come from across Okinawa and all over Japan. The outside supporters included

4 'Burokkori no mori o mamoru kai', *Voice of Takae from Okinawa, Japan*, August 2007.

5 *Ryūkyū Shimpō*, Boeikyoku ga jūmin teiso, jūmingawa wa kōgi seimei, January 30, 2010.

6 'Jūmingawa, kikyaku motomeru', *Okinawa Times*, March 20, 2010.

7 *Ibid.*

8 We confirmed this point through discussion records of the Okinawa Defense Bureau officials and the Takae residents. The meeting was held on February 1, 2010 at a local community center in Takae.

members of ecology preservation groups, anti-war groups, researchers of peace studies (like us), and students from across the country. All were closely watching the construction workers at work on the new US military airfield. A narrative account by one of the sit-in participants is as follows:

We moved into Takae six years ago. When I first visited Takae, I was incredibly impressed with the beautiful surroundings. I had never imagined that we still had this sort of rich, untouched nature on the main island of Okinawa. I had always dreamed of living near a river and listening to the sound of a small stream. I was incredibly happy since Takae's natural surroundings was exactly what I had been looking for. Our five children swim everyday in summer; they just enjoy life here – running around the fields with bare feet, chasing insects, going fishing, indulging in wood crafts, and so on.

But we also found that the American Northern Training Area is located in this beautiful neighborhood. Helicopters fly at a very low altitude, just over our heads, and the noise is unbelievably loud. We used to live in Kadena, where the US Air Force Base is located; therefore, we are used to the loud noise. Here, in Takae, however, the noise is worse than what we used to experience in Kadena. Even the glass in the window rattles.

What, then, would happen if the helicopters were to crash?

When we heard the noise for the first time, our kids ran straight to me and started to cry. The noise made by the helicopters, which disturbs our peaceful daily life, is infuriating.

We constantly worry about the ways our lives are being changed, and whether we can protect our children.

While observing and talking to the sit-in protesters and supporters, there was one persistent theme that underlined their words and actions – nonviolence (*hi bōryoku*). The protesters clearly rejected any involvement with any type of violence. They rejected any influence of violence upon their lives, including their neighborhood, and absolutely refused to be involved with any kind of war activity. The protesters continue to voice their strong opposition to the Japanese state's action exclusively by maintaining the sit-in protest to protect their peaceful, everyday life. Indeed, none of the protesters have ever used any force. The term 'Nonviolence' is posted as a slogan on the tents for the sit-in protesters.

The local residents justified their sit-in action by stating that it was a democratic expression based on the philosophy of nonviolence as well as an attempt to monitor the actions of the oppressive state.⁹ In fact, in all probability, the local people will continue with the protest in order to preserve the foundation of their daily lives. They are now unwillingly pushed into the presence of US military operations. In addition, they are certain that such jungle-based military training has nothing to do with the security of Japan itself, because there is no potential threat of military attack on Japan's jungles. In fact, there are no jungles on the main islands of the Japanese Archipelago. Jungles only exist in Okinawa, which is situated in a subtropical zone.

Further, it is worth noting that women play an important role as supporters of the protest. This protest is an example of *unai* activism. According to Miyume Tanji, *unai* is a form of activism that originated in the local folk religion of Okinawa.¹⁰ In one Okinawan dialect, *unai* means 'sisters'. The character of the folk religion of Okinawa emphasizes the importance of women's power, especially spiritual power. Tanji points out that since the 1980s women have taken on a new role as protagonists in their own right and on their own terms. This development is linked with the emergence of *unai* activism, which usually involves activist groups run exclusively by and for women. They are at the forefront of the anti-base citizen ideology.

The sit-in protest at Takae has garnered support from across the country and is also possibly gathering support from beyond Japan's national borders. One of the sit-in protesters created an email list through an Internet site, with the aim of persuading people to join the protest.¹¹ On 29

9 “‘Seitō kōi’ uttae, herippado suwarikomi, kuni wa “bōgai” to shuchō”, *Okinawa Times*, January 28, 2009.

10 Miyume Tanji, *Myth, Protest and Struggle in Okinawa* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2006). Also see Masamichi Inoue, *Okinawa and the U.S. Military: Identity Making in the Age of Globalization* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

11 See <http://www.shomei.tv/project-590.html> (accessed March 18, 2010).

October 2009, 51,298 signatures against the construction of additional helipads for the US military in Takae were collected, and they were submitted to the Naha District Court.¹² However, the coverage by the major Tokyo-based media outlets of the ongoing developments in Takae is insignificant.

The right to live peacefully

One of the key rationales behind the sit-in protest in Takae is based on the ‘right to live peacefully’ (*heiwa teki seizon ken*), a right guaranteed by the Japanese Constitution. This right protects the Japanese people by entitling them to judicial injunction, compensation, and redress in the event of its violation. The right to live peacefully also encompasses another entitlement – the right of the people to be neither war victims nor war criminals. The Japanese Constitution clearly articulates the right in the Preface and Article 9.¹³

Preface (excerpt):

We recognize that all peoples of the world have the right to live in peace, free from fear and want.

Chapter II. Renunciation of War:

Article 9. Aspiring sincerely to an international peace based on justice and order, the Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as means of settling international disputes.

(2) In order to accomplish the aim of the preceding paragraph, land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained. The right of belligerency of the state will not be recognized.

The right to live peacefully is now gaining much attention among the Japanese people. People are trying to define the concept of peaceful living, following the proactive, ongoing, and speedy developments in the expansion of the role of the Self-Defense Forces (SDF) in Japanese society and politics. In October 2008, the Japan Federation of Bar Associations announced a declaration affirming the current meaning of the right to live peacefully and of Article 9 of the constitution. Here are excerpts from the document:¹⁴

(1) The right to live peacefully is a basic human right on which all fundamental human rights exist. This right should be recognized as a concrete norm to realize the right of all people in the world to live peacefully in today’s world of constant conflicts and violence.

(2) Article 9 renounces all war and the use of, or intimidation by, military forces; stipulates, as a pioneering provision in the world, that forces will never be maintained; denies the right of belligerency; and imposes a constitutional responsibility on our country for actively promoting the reduction of armaments and disarmament in the international community.

(3) Article 9 is effectively functioning to prohibit Japan from using forces overseas, exercising the right of collective self-defense, and to greatly restrict the organization, equipment, and activities of the Self-Defense Forces, notwithstanding the serious and tense relationship between this provision and the realities of politics.

The constitution has established a noble goal to realize respect for individuals and eternal peace and proclaims the right to live peacefully as an essential condition to achieve that goal. Article 9 has been set as a concrete measure for this purpose.

In 1997, the Bar Association declared that the idea of achieving permanent peace by renouncing war and giving up military force, as clearly stipulated in Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution,

12 See ‘Yanbaru higashison, takae no genjō’, <http://takae.ti-da.net/d2009-10.html> (accessed March 18, 2010).

13 The official English translation of the Japanese Constitution is available at the Japanese National Diet Library website at <http://www.ndl.go.jp/constitution/e/etc/c01.html> (accessed April 28, 2010).

14 Japan Federation of Bar Associations (JFBA), ‘Declaration affirming the current meaning of the right to live peacefully and Article 9 of the Constitution’, presented on October 3, 2008 at the JFBA Convention on Protection of Human Rights. Available at <http://www.nichibenren.or.jp/en/activities/statements/081003.html> (accessed March 14, 2009).

was a pioneering concept in the path toward peace. It is a concept of which, in a global context, Japan can be proud. But in the past decade political parties as well as various interest groups have been presented with draft proposals for revising the Japanese Constitution. Some of these drafts even proposed the deletion of the right to live peacefully.¹⁵

The Nagoya High Court ruling on the Japanese involvement in the war in Iraq (April 2008) was very significant in the context of the above discussion of the right to live peacefully. This is because the ruling set a clear precedent in terms of the rights of each person and the foundation upon which all human rights are based. More specifically, the ruling admitted two things:¹⁶ first, at its core, the right to live peacefully not only includes the right to not be a war victim but also encompasses freedom from being a war perpetrator; second, the right fundamentally includes the freedom to veto any preparatory actions for war undertaken by the nation. In addition, another similar judgment was issued by the Okayama District Court in February 2009.¹⁷ In a case surrounding the constitutionality of the SDF's actions in Iraq, it ruled for the right to live peacefully, although it rejected the plaintiffs' request for an injunction and damages.

The exposure of local residents in Takae to both the unbearable roar of aircraft engines and the danger of air crashes is a major transgression that ignores and infringes upon the Japanese Constitution's guarantee of the right to live peacefully, which is equal to a guarantee of a peaceful, cultivated, and healthy everyday life. The participants of the nonviolent sit-in protest serve as a constant reminder of how the planned construction of helipads in Takae district threatens a basic human right of the area's inhabitants: the right to a peaceful life. These protesters will never let the authorities build the helipads in their neighborhood.

Takae at the forefront of global military operations

The general feeling among the protesters is that the state is now exploring all possible avenues to ensure that the construction of the helipads progresses smoothly. In fact, the state has increased its suppression of the anti-base or peace movements, by using all legal means and forms of political pressure at its disposal. The sit-in protest in Takae is actually the first case in Japan where the state has brought a specific peace movement to court. This state's action is totally against the philosophy of the right to live peacefully, which the Preface and Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution guarantee. It also oppresses the freedom of thought and conscience (Article 19 in the Japanese Constitution) as well as the freedom of assembly and association, and speech, press and all other forms of expression (Article 21 in the Japanese Constitution), both crucial, fundamental human rights. In its defense, the state has based its actions on the view that local people should not interfere in issues of national security, as these remain the sole responsibility of the state and usually involve the use of military power. Such governmental suppression is currently concentrated on the local residents in Takae. Indeed, despite the fact that the majority of the current protesters are supporters from outside the region, the list of names in the plea submitted by the Okinawa Defense Bureau exclusively comprised Takae residents. Meanwhile, the citizens continue to express their resistance solely in a nonviolent form – one of the most fundamental techniques employed by the participants of social movements.

The Japanese government has tended to exert power in the international political arena in the post-Cold War era. As a result of these efforts, Japan has been called a 'normal' nation,¹⁸ a term coined by Ichiro Ozawa – one of the current DPJ leaders – in the early 1990s, which was

15 On the development, see Glenn D. Hook and Gavan McCormack, *Japan's Contested Constitution: Documents and Analysis* (London: Routledge, 2001).

16 Nagoya High Court, Jieitai no iraku hahei sashidome nado seikyū kōso jiken, hanketsu, April 17, 2008.

17 'Jieitai iraku haken sashitome soshō, chisai de haiso mo genkoku gawa takaku hyōka', *Mainichi Shinbun*, February 25, 2009.

18 Ozawa Ichiro, *Nihon kaizō keikaku* (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1993).

when he had called for the Japanese government to approve the SDF's collaboration with UN forces. Furthermore, the government is trying to make a military contribution in a 'visible' form by, for example, deploying the SDF on foreign assignments.¹⁹ The use of such strategies is evident even in the country's somewhat remote locations like Takae. In fact, Takae's residents have noticed that they seem to be at the forefront of global military operations.²⁰ They observed that, in mid-May 2008, military officers from Germany, Israel, and the Netherlands had visited the Northern Training Area in their neighborhood to investigate the viability of training their soldiers in a joint operation with the US military and the Japanese SDF in the Jungle Warfare Center. The foreign military officials had also visited the sites earmarked for the helipad construction.²¹

At present, many of these locals continue to peacefully participate in the ongoing sit-in protest to protect their right to live peacefully. Using Gavan McCormack's term, Japan is often considered a 'Client State' of America – a state that enjoys only the formal trappings of Westphalian sovereignty and independence. This implies that Japan is neither viewed as a colony nor a puppet state, but one that has internalized the requirement to give preference to other interests over its own. Japan needs to promote and protect its own identity.²² Japan would do well to follow the example set by the people of Takae, who preeminently promote the right to live peacefully and feel that the pursuit of this right should supersede any other interest. When we stand in Takae, an outlying Japanese district, we can indeed imagine a different kind of international political life. People on the ground are trying to challenge the conventional peace and security discourse utilized by major military powers. They powerfully seek non-violence: they are trying to protect a quiet, peaceful everyday life; a right that was clearly guaranteed to them by their Constitution.

Note on contributors

Yasushi Ikeo is a lecturer in peace studies at Ritsumeikan University, Kyoto, Japan. He is conducting extensive fieldwork in Okinawa and Iwakuni, where the US military has a major presence. He has written numerous books and articles in Japanese, including *Heiwagaku o tsukuru* [Introduction to Peace Studies] (Koyo shobo, 2009) and *Datsugunjika e no dotei* [The Process toward De-militarization] (Horitsu bunkasha, forthcoming).

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19 Kenneth B. Pyle, *Japan Rising: The Resurgence of Japanese Power and Purpose* (New York: Public Affairs, 2007), 363–74.

20 Masaaki Gabe points out a fundamental difference between the roles of the US military base in Okinawa and those located in mainland Japan. The latter are mainly used for providing logistical support and repair services; meanwhile, in Okinawa, regular war training is provided. See Masaaki Gabe, 'It is High Time to Wake Up: Japanese Foreign Policy in the Twenty-First Century', in *Japan and Okinawa: Structure and Subjectivity*, ed. Glenn Hook and Richard Siddle (London: Routledge, 2003), 55–73.

21 Reportage of this event was not put forth until almost one and a half months after the visit date. See 'Isuraeru, doitsu, oranda gun, hokubu kunrenjō de enshu kentō', *Ryukyu Shimpo*, July 1, 2008.

22 Gavan McCormack, *Client State: Japan in the American Embrace* (London: Verso, 2007).