

Okinawa: State of Emergency 沖縄 非常事態

C. Douglas Lummis

February 10, 2015: Outside the gate of the US Marine Corp's Camp Schwab at Henoko in northern Okinawa a sign announced that this was the 220th day of the sit-in there. Next to it stood an elderly man holding a flag bearing the words, DO NOT DISCRIMINATE AGAINST OKINAWANS. He told me he had not been given it by any organisation, but had had it made with his own money. "This is it", he said to me urgently. "This is the issue!"

His flag symbolises the sea change which the Okinawan anti-base movement has undergone in the last fifteen years or so, a change in thinking that has led to a major political realignment, which in turn has affected the shape of the increasingly desperate political confrontation taking place there now.

Briefly stated, for many years Okinawan politics was a contest between the anti-war, anti base progressives and the fewer but richer conservatives, who didn't much mind the bases so long as the money kept coming in. Then in 1995 an Okinawan elementary school girl was gang raped by three GIs, and the island exploded. An all-Okinawa protest rally was held, which was attended by progressives and conservatives alike - some 70,000 people, which is a huge number in a population of 1,300,000. The US and Japanese governments realised they had to do something.

What they came up with was to promise to close the US Marine Corps Air Station at

Futenma, smack in the middle of densely populated Ginowan City in central Okinawa. People rejoiced - for a day, until on the following day they learned that the air facility was not to be taken out of the Prefecture, but relocated in the village of Henoko, in Nago City, up north. Joy was replaced by outrage.

Almost twenty years have elapsed since then. While the Futenma Air Station remains open, so far the anti base protest has prevented a new base from being built. The slogan one heard repeated most often in those years - and still today - is "While Okinawa comprises only 0.6% of Japanese territory, it houses 74% of all the US bases in Japan". Interestingly, this is not an anti-war slogan-it does not demand the elimination of all US bases on Okinawa-but a protest against blatantly unequal treatment. As the significance of this unequal treatment worked its way into Okinawan consciousness, this led to a change in the thinking of anti-base activists. To the Okinawan people's passionate pacifism was added a growing awareness that they were being treated as a colony of Japan- or as some would have it, a dual colony of Japan and the US. And terms like "discrimination", which had not been part of the political vocabulary, moved to the centre of the public discourse. This altered way of defining the situation opened the door for conservatives to join the anti-base movement, and many did, splitting the conservative camp. There is nothing about being a conservative that makes you immune to feeling insulted when you are discriminated against.

Another factor driving the protest movement is that the plan for this new base entails dumping massive amounts of dirt and concrete into Oura Bay, Okinawa's, and Japan's last pristine coral garden and a rich habitat for thousands of rare species of sea creatures, including the endangered sea mammal the dugong. Not only progressives, but many conservatives were genuinely offended by the wanton destructiveness of the plan. Gradually a new coalition was formed, ideologically less pure than the progressive camp had been on its own, but far more powerful politically.

In 2010 the incumbent conservative Governor Nakaima Hirokazu was told by one of his principal advisors, then Naha Mayor Onaga Takeshi, that if he didn't adopt a positive anti-base stand in the upcoming election, he would surely lose. He changed his stance accordingly, saying that instead of moving the Marine Air Facility to Henoko, it should be moved to mainland Japan. This won him the election. For four years this grumpy old man put on a fine performance of being opposed to the new base at Henoko and then, toward the end of his term of office, suddenly changed and issued the permit for reclamation to begin. This betrayal of his campaign promise caused great outrage, including on the part of Naha Mayor Onaga, who had persuaded him to make that promise. In the next election, held in 2014, Onaga ran against Nakaima on an anti-base platform and defeated him by an unprecedented margin of almost 100,000 votes. Shortly before Onaga's historic victory, the anti-base Mayor of Nago City was reelected despite an avalanche of support for his opponent by the Abe Shinzo Government. In addition, in an election for the Lower House of the Diet, all four of the pro-base candidates in Okinawa were soundly beaten in the single-district constituencies. That Okinawan voters had set their will against the new base was absolutely clear, with additional evidence

provided by repeated public opinion polls.

The Japanese and US Governments decided simply to ignore this overwhelming Okinawan opposition to the new base. Prime Minister Abe repeatedly announced that the elections would have no effect on construction. It seemed to be an act calculated to persuade any doubters that his Government's policy toward Okinawa was indeed founded on deep discrimination. And this is where we are now. On January 15 on-site preparations for construction, which had been suspended for the Diet election, resumed. On Okinawa that legendary conundrum is now being tested: what happens when an irresistible force meets an immovable object?



Woman manhandled by riot police.

On the side of the immovable object there is first of all the sit-in in front of Camp Schwab's Gate One, which from 15 January has been maintained 24 hours a day seven days a week. The object of this demonstration is to prevent, or failing that, to delay, the entry into the base of trucks related to the construction of the base. On the side of the irresistible force there

is the two busloads of riot police who have the job of dragging or carrying away the protesters when they sit or lie down in front of the trucks. As there are fewer protesters at night than in the daytime, most of the trucks now come in just after dawn, or sometimes even in the middle of the night. The protesters have rigged up flimsy and leaky tents out of plastic sheets and poles, where they can sleep - or anyway try to. I hear they have little luck with that, especially on the nights when it rains. Despite that, many people camp there for days at a time. Most of the people carrying out the sit-in are middle-aged or elderly - some in their seventies and eighties. This is partly because as they are mostly retired, they are free to go there every day, and partly because this is the generation that bears the memory of the Battle of Okinawa, and has a deep horror of and aversion for war and everything associated with it. This struggle against the Henoko base may well be the final statement and historical legacy of this generation of Okinawans.

A second confrontation is taking place on Oura Bay, which is adjacent to Camp Schwab and is the proposed site for the new air facility. Here a Japanese Coast Guard flotilla has roped off a gigantic area with a string of floats which they call an oil fence - I suppose because this is what is used to contain oil spills on the sea - and they have ordered everyone not to trespass inside that fence. Every day a dozen or more protesters embark on sea kayaks and cruise up and down the fence. Some slip over it to try and interfere with construction.

To prevent them from doing this the government has dispatched a massive force of Coast Guard cutters and speedboats. The cutters, lined up off shore all with their bows facing the construction site, look like a Great White Fleet. I have counted as many as twelve ships; people with better eyes than mine say

they count more. This would mean that the Japanese Government is sending out after these sea kayakers about the same force that it sends out when it stages its big confrontations with China over the contested Senkaku/Diaoyu islands. From the shore, it looks as though Okinawa were about to be invaded. From these stately white cutters comes a gaggle of several score black rubber twin-engined speedboats, each carrying four hefty, helmeted Coastguardsmen (I haven't seen any women), their bodies all lumpy with the various pieces of equipment attached to their lifejackets, some with scuba tanks and fins, all prepared to leap into the water after any protesters attempting to swim.

The kayakers have mastered the art of getting over the oil fence (lean back until the bow rises out of the water, paddle hard on to the fence, then lean forward and the Kayak tips in). But those who get in are immediately surrounded by a crowd of these giant water insects. "We do this to protect their safety" they say, which doesn't explain why they knock them out of their kayaks, jump in after them and hold their heads under water. It also doesn't explain why they take them four km away from shore, out beyond the coral reef, dump them and their kayaks in the open sea and tell them to get back as best they can. Even though the Kayakers are out numbered and out powered, they constitute a major obstruction: so much energy is spent trying to keep them out that it's hard to get much work done. And the massive force the Government has organised to oppose them is a clear indicator of how much the Government fears them. But with the government beginning to unload blocks of cement weighing between 10 and 45 tons into the sea, the urgency of halting construction grows.

So the kayakers also do not give up, and come

back every day.



Confrontation on the bay.

The third point of confrontation is the Governor's office. In the alliance between anti-base progressives and anti-base conservatives, it is mainly the progressives who are carrying out the sit-in and the Kayak action, but it is mainly the conservatives who have taken control of the Governor's office. And, however sincere these conservatives may be in their anti-base sentiments,

they are not accustomed to this kind of confrontational politics. Moving slowly, shuffling papers, working through channels and making deals is a way of life for them, and they find it hard to adjust to their new situation.

Immediately following his election, Governor Onaga went up to Tokyo to pay his respects to the Prime Minister and other officials, as is the custom, and Prime Minister Abe Shinzo and Chief Cabinet Secretary Suga Yoshihide flatly refused to meet him, leaving him to sit in his hotel room. He was met only by Yamaguchi Shunichi, the Minister for Okinawan Affairs.

Refusing to be cowed, he has been to Tokyo a number of times since then, but at the time of

this writing Yamaguchi is the only government official of any importance who has met with him. Most Okinawans understood this not only as a personal insult to Onaga, but an insult to all Okinawans. It was an unmistakable message that their political will, expressed clearly in Onaga's landslide election victory on an anti-base platform, was going to be treated as not worthy of consideration by the Abe administration. Tokyo immediately underlined the point by cutting the budget for Okinawa by 4.6% to 334 billion yen (\$2.8 billion) after five successive years of increase.

The major issue facing Governor Onaga now is what to do about the previous Governor's formal approval of the Defense Department's request for a permit to fill the section of Oura Bay on which the air facility is to be built.

Under Japanese law, reclamation cannot be carried out without the Prefectural Governor's approval, and the former Governor Nakaima gave it. And under Japanese law, a governor has the power also either to annul or to revoke a permit already given. Annulment is like the annulment of a marriage: there were legal flaws in the process, so the thing never happened: you were never married after all. Revocation is like a divorce: you were legally married, but something important changed, so now you put an end to it. In the case of a reclamation permit, the former, having its basis in law, is much stronger and more decisive. But to do it in a convincing manner, first the whole legal process needs to be carefully investigated by legal experts. The latter is not based on law, but rather is a political judgment, which the Governor may make at his discretion. Thus it can be done right away, but is in greater danger of being ignored by the Tokyo Government.

The Governor has established a committee of legal and environmental experts to investigate

whether there were legal flaws in the process leading up to the issuance of the permit, of sufficient seriousness to justify annulling it. The committee chair says it will take to the end of June to complete this investigation. That is a very long time to expect the kayakers to keep up their daily

sea battles, and the sit-inners to continue their 24-hour watch. Moreover, destruction of Oura Bay's precious coral garden has already begun, and it is not clear how much will be left by July. So there is quite naturally growing pressure on the Governor to issue a revocation order immediately. But against this, there is the likelihood that even if such an order is issued, the Tokyo Government will simply ignore it, as they have ignored everything else the Governor has done so far. This would mean that the kayakers and the sit-inners would have to continue their protest in any case. And in addition there is the opinion of some lawyers that the issuance of a revocation order now would damage the chances that an annulment order, should one be issued in July, would hold up in court.

At the time of this writing, it is not clear how this terrible dilemma will be solved. But it seems unlikely that the burden on the protesters at Camp Schwab is going to lighten any time soon.

There is a daily bus that takes people from Naha, where I live, to the sit in at Henoko. As it is a tour bus, there is a microphone, and the hour-and-a half trip has become the occasion for highly interesting political discussions. Last week when I was on it, a woman said, "Anyway, whatever happens, we have to win this one. If we don't, it is the end for Okinawa." Many people feel that way: this one is different. The Tokyo Government, finding that it can no longer prevail in Okinawa with its usual

methods - money, back room deals, false promises, divide and rule - has launched an all out frontal attack on Okinawa and all it stands for and believes in. It seems they are aiming to break the spirit of this brave and independent-minded people once and for all. I believe they will fail, but it's going to be close.

If there are any readers of this piece who would like to lend some support to the Okinawan people in this crisis, there are various things you could do. First of all, you could raise your voice. Depending on your taste this could be by personal communication with someone, through a microphone, by letter, placard, or leaflet. If you live outside Japan, you could express your opinion to a Japanese Embassy or Consulate, either by going inside, or from the street outside. If you live in the US, you could make your thoughts known to your representative in Congress, or to the Chair of the House Armed Services Committee, to the Commandant of the US Marine Corps, or the President (more accurately, to his flak catchers). (If you contact any of these US Government people, you might remind them that if they continue on their present course they are in real danger of losing access to Okinawa altogether - which would be perfectly OK with me, but which might nudge them toward thinking a little more carefully about what they are doing. Surely the best place to relocate the Futenma Airbase would be within the continental US.), If you live in Japan and are able to do so, you could go to Okinawa and see the situation for yourself, and even join the sit-in.

And if you are a Japanese national living outside Okinawa, then you have available to you another extremely powerful weapon. A central premise of the All Okinawa Movement is that the forced unequal distribution of the US bases (75% in tiny Okinawa) is unjust and

discriminatory. To act in solidarity with Okinawa now would mean to act in solidarity with this premise: DO NOT DISCRIMINATE AGAINST OKINAWANS. One straightforward way to do that would be to form in the region where you live an Equal Distribution Society (byoudou futan no kai) and announce that while you do not like US bases, you feel it is time to lighten Okinawa's burden and accept the Futenma Marine Corps Air Station in your area, at least until Japanese public opinion supports moving the US bases out of Japan altogether, which presently it does not. This would have the effect of destroying the Government's only "real" reason for pushing it on Henoko ("No other place will accept it") and also of greatly invigorating the Okinawan movement.

Of course there are any number of other possible actions that one could take. If you feel like offering support to Okinawa, now is the time!

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