

Every day except Sundays, holidays and typhoon days, Okinawans confront the US military at Henoko, site of a planned new base

Douglas Lummis, Higa Tami

Every day except for Sundays, holidays and typhoon days hundreds of huge dump trucks enter the US Marine Corps' Camp Schwab at Henoko, in northern Okinawa, carrying landfill – dirt, sand, stones – and dump it into the sea offshore from the base. Eventually, they hope, they will be able to dump enough to support an airstrip on top of the pile, and transform Schwab from a camp into a superbase. Every day except for Sundays, holidays and typhoon days, Okinawans and their supporters from Japan and abroad carry out a sit-in at the gate aimed at preventing, or at least slowing, the entry of these trucks. This sit-in has continued now for more than 1700 days – possibly qualifying for the Guinness Book, if anyone would take the trouble to make the application.



Japanese police remove protesters who are blocking the gate during anti U.S. base protest outside of Camp Schwab on February 22, 2019. Anti-base protesters stage a sit-in at the gate of the U.S. Marine Corps' Camp Schwab blocking the passage of construction vehicles mobilized by the Japanese government to slow base construction.

Okinawans have any number of reasons for opposing this new base: the fact that the land reclamation will probably kill one of the world's last undamaged coral gardens in the adjacent Oura Bay; the fact that US bases have always brought with them crimes, accidents and pollution; the fact that mainland Japan's refusing to accept this base but forcing it on tiny Okinawa is a straw-that-breaks-the-camel's-back act of discrimination. And there is the fact that this and all the other bases here trample on Okinawa's essentially peace-loving sensibilities.

Most of the people doing the sit-in are retired. This is one of the sources of their strength. Unlike younger people they don't have to worry about not getting a job, or losing their job, or not getting promoted. Most are living on a retirement income that, now that their children are independent, is adequate. Many of them have nothing much else that they need to do, and if they weren't going to the sit-in might well be at home watching TV. But much deeper than those factors, this is the generation that bears the memory of the Battle of Okinawa, or if not that, then the devastation that it left behind. (Just last week, one woman of this group said to me – smilingly – “I lived barefoot for ten years”). This is their last chance to transform those memories into something concrete. To do this, they have formed themselves into a powerful political class.

They like to call the sit-in experience “Henoko University”. The bus from Naha to Henoko, on most days carrying 20-30 protesters, takes 90

minutes, the same as a typical university class. The buses have mikes that are passed around; the people exchange information and ideas, and practice expressing themselves in a semi-public, as in a seminar. They compose poems and recite them, compose songs and sing them, and have intense discussions about strategy.

At the gate, the audience becomes larger, on most days 100-200 protesters, with 500 or more on special occasions, and the discussion continues.

Among the regulars is Higa Tami, a retired teacher; she once managed a private school (juku) for junior high and high school students. Like most of the sit-inners, she is a relative newcomer to protest politics; she told me that her first contact with the anti-base movement was when she attended the 2014 All-Okinawa rally held prior to then-Governor Onaga Takeshi's trip to the US. In 2015, at a gathering on *Irei no Hi*, Okinawa's day commemorating the war dead, riot police demanded to see some papers she was carrying and when they saw that she was carrying literature critical of Abe Shinzo (who was in Okinawa that day), they detained her. This was the occasion for her joining the sit-in at Henoko twice a week. For the last several years she has been in charge of

the Wednesday sit-in bus from Naha. At the March 16, 2019 rally demanding that the Prefectural Referendum on construction of the new Henoko base (73% voted no) be respected, she was asked to represent the sit-inners. Her remarks, translated below, received the biggest applause. Her age is given at the end of those remarks: Forever 60.

Greeting from Ms Higa Tami, Representing the Sit-In at Camp Schwab Gate, Henoko, at the All-Okinawa Gathering to Demand that the Results of the Prefectural Referendum be

Respected and the Will of the People Honored.

16 March, 2019

Haitai gusuyo chuganabira. [In *Uchinaguchi*: Greetings everyone]

I am one of the Naha citizens who take the bus from the Citizens' Plaza in front of the Prefectural Office Building and joins the sit-in opposing the reclamation at Henoko. These buses operate from Monday through Saturday, a total of eight per week. Anyone can board them. There are people from mainland Japan who come three or four times a year. There are people from abroad. Bonds of bus friendships are formed.

At the site, where joy and anger are concentrated, we learn about Okinawan history, about the spirit that neither wavers nor gives in, about the progress or lack thereof of the construction project, about the preciousness of the sea, of the mountains, of all living things. Being forcibly removed, we sing, dance to the music of *sanshin* and guitar, and give each other support and comfort, which is why we are able to go on.

At the same time we silently bear a sadness that cannot be healed. First of all it is sadness that while people close to us have passed away, the time required to mourn for them and to pray for their happiness in the next world has been taken from us. The silence is broken by a column of dump trucks loaded with dirt and sand; open your eyes and in front of you is a line of riot police and behind them people from the Defense Bureau commanding, "HURRY UP! MOVE!"

The US military airbase said to be the most dangerous in the world, settled in at Futenma for more than 73 years, is to be moved to Henoko, less than a full Marathon's distance away – but at Futenma it has neither a military

port nor an ordnance depot.

For three months now they have been dumping dirt into the sea, the beautiful, irreplaceable sea, which it is our duty to protect. Each grain of that dirt is a fragment of the earth. When I think of this as a tax that is being squeezed out of us, I am overwhelmed with anger and indignation, and truly feel I want to resign from being Japanese.

The ocean should go on being blue.

The forests should go on being dense.

Instead we have the horrendous pace at which the environment of Henoko and Takae are being destroyed.

Does Japan have an Environmental Minister?

I reject everything connected with war.

I do not recognize the Japan-US Agreement either in the past or in the future –

an agreement in which Okinawa is treated as non-existent.

We have determined that we will not force the Governor into a bitter choice, and that we will stand by him.

We are an Asian people, and we will not be misled.

We who declare ourselves as forever 60 and in the prime of life, *makirangutushi chibati ichabirayatai* (In *uchinaguchi*: “. . .

vow that we will fight on and never give up”).

We will not allow it.

We will never give it up:

The sea of Henoko.

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