

# On Okinawa, U.S. Marines raise tensions with accusations and arrests of peace campaigners

Jon Mitchell



On January 8, Robert Eldridge, a former university professor, appeared on a Japanese neo-nationalist TV network where he branded Okinawan demonstrations "hate speech".

As the Japanese government intensifies its crackdown versus demonstrators blocking construction of a new Pentagon base on Okinawa, the United States Marine Corps has waded into the fray with a series of accusations against activists - followed by the arrest of two peace campaigners.

Between January and February, three senior USMC officials accused anti-base campaigners of "hate speech", "mob rule" and "faking injuries" while on February 22, base security guards seized two demonstrators - only to see them released the next day.

## Senior USMC officials' accusations

1. Robert Eldridge, Deputy Assistant Chief of Staff of Government and External Affairs for the USMC



Eldridge on Channel Sakura, Jan. 8

Eldridge made the comments in Japanese during a show on the Okinawa branch of Channel Sakura. While discussing what he called the unpleasant experiences encountered by some Americans on Okinawa, he explained to the presenter, "As you know, near Futenma there are people (committing) many kinds of hate speech."

Eldridge's comments apparently targeted residents engaged in demonstrations against the unpopular Marine Corps installation in Ginowan City, a base that the US has pledged to close since 1996.

Channel Sakura, which styles itself a Japanese culture channel, is infamous for its glorification of Japan's role in World War II and for airing shows that deny the Japanese military forced Korean women into sexual slavery. In 2007, its founder, Mizushima Satoru, directed the movie "The Truth About Nanjing," which labeled the 1937-38 massacre - in which, according to Japanese and international historians, tens of thousands of Chinese were killed - a fabrication.

Eldridge also appeared on Channel Sakura last September.

Further suggesting close ties between the USMC and the Japanese neo-nationalist network, last December, a Channel Sakura TV host appeared on the Pentagon's own AFN radio show. Eldridge was also on the same program.



Channel Sakura TV host and Eldridge on AFN Okinawa.

Neither United States Forces Japan nor Eldridge responded to requests to confirm who had authorized the appearance on Channel Sakura.

Further escalating tensions, on February 9, Eldridge posted a series of comments on the website of [The Japan Times](https://www.thetimes.co.uk) accusing Okinawan demonstrators of "mob rule" and claiming there had been "many physical attacks on Americans" by protestors.

Sato Manabu, a professor of political science at Okinawa International University, criticized Eldridge's comments. "When the weak protest against the strong, that does not constitute 'hate speech' - no matter how painful the truth sounds to the ears of the U.S. military. By appearing on such a TV network, the USMC is ruining the little good will Okinawa people hold toward it."

## 2. Captain Caleb D. Eames, Deputy Public Affairs Officer for the Marine Corps Installations Pacific

On January 22, Captain Caleb D. Eames, Deputy Public Affairs Officer for the Marine Corps Installations Pacific, likened demonstrators injured in clashes with the authorities to play-acting professional footballers - claiming that "the attempt to appear injured is laughable when you see it in person."

Eames singled out for criticism what he described as demonstrators "lying on the road, holding onto a moving vehicle, and being dragged by their own choice, then claiming that they were scraped while in a peace protest."

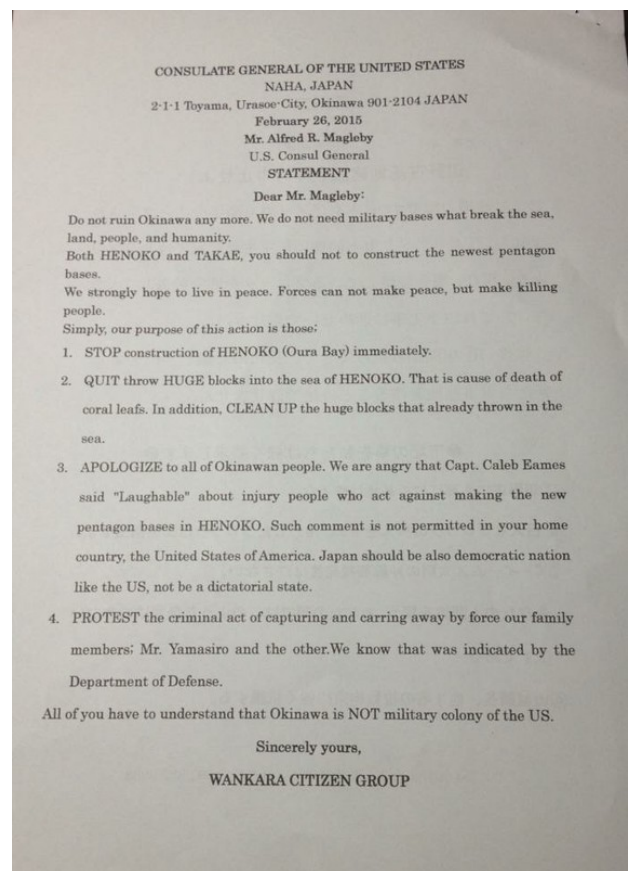
In a January 22 email, Eames also accused Henoko demonstrators of "jabbing American employees with sticks" and "yelling English profanity and curse words" at his children.

Contacted to provide an opportunity to clarify his accusations, Eames replied that he had intended his comments to refer to demonstrators outside MCAS Futenma - not Henoko; however he failed to elaborate on the faked injuries or assaults which he alleges took place. Nor did he retract his comment that the injuries to demonstrators were "laughable".

Eames claimed that his original comments were "simply sharing personal observations about situations I have experienced and viewed around Futenma, not Henoko." He added, that they were not "an official statement

representing official views of the Marine Corps or any other organization."

Eames's comments were reported on the front pages of both Okinawan daily newspapers, the mainland Asahi Shimbun and the nightly TV news. On February 26, demonstrators staged a protest outside the U.S. consulate on Okinawa in which they called Eames's comments "discriminatory" and "unforgivable".



U.S. consulate demonstrators' Feb. 26 demands

On February 14, Ryukyu Shimpo rebuked USMC officials in an editorial titled, [US Marine Corps officials' insulting remarks: It is time to leave.](#)

Okinawans were particularly angered by Eames's suggestion that their injuries were "laughable."

According to Nago City's US Base Affairs Section, between last November and February 4, 12 demonstrators were injured in confrontations with the police and Coast Guard - 5 of which were taken to hospital by ambulance. Injuries verified by Nago City include a man whose rib was broken when he was shoved in the chest by a member of the Coast Guard on January 16 and a 49 year-old man injured by the riot police on January 23 who was left with injuries to his hand requiring a month to recover.



Japanese Coast Guard monitoring media at Henoko

On Henoko Bay, the government has established a temporary exclusion zone marked with orange buoys and enforced by dozens of Coast Guard speedboats. Members of the Coast Guard immediately board any vessels entering the zone and, in the case of canoes, they forcibly drag their occupants onto government boats.

During one such incident last September - available to view [here](#) - a member of the Coast Guard is seen grabbing a canoeist by his throat and screaming into his face. The treatment left the demonstrator with injuries to his neck which required two weeks recovery time.

"The Japanese constitution allows us the right to peaceful protest. But (the Coast Guard) grabbed the young man and started screaming in his face. We worried he was going to kill him," Miyagi Chie, the resident who took the video told The Japan Times.

The Coast Guard has repeatedly targeted members of the media attempting to film its confrontations with demonstrators. Last month, the Coast Guard dragged a boat carrying journalists from the area. Then on January 20, a Coast Guard member seized documentary filmmaker Kageyama Asako in a leg-lock and apparently tried to seize her camera.

Although the incident was caught on film by local media, the Coast Guard issued a statement in which it explained its member was merely attempting to pass Kageyama on his way to the back of the boat. It later accused the Okinawan media of incorrect reporting of the matter.

On February 2, the Coast Guard introduced a new - and potentially lethal - tactic. According to reports verified by Nago City, after detaining 8 canoeists in shallow coastal waters, the Coast Guard took them more than four kilometres



from land where it released them - forcing them to paddle back to the shore. It repeated the tactic on February 3, capturing 19 canoeists then releasing them into rough seas 4 kilometres from shore.



Henoko on the edge

Given this well-documented catalogue of Coast Guard and Marine provocations and injuries, accusations of fakery infuriated many protesters and Okinawan citizens.

"Almost everyday, demonstrators are being injured on land and sea. Bloodied heads and broken bones. These are not the kind of injuries people can fake," said Shimabukuro Fumiko, 85.



Shimabukuro: "Come and call me a liar to my face."

On November 20 last year, Shimabukuro - a survivor of the Battle of Okinawa - was knocked unconscious while attempting to block a construction truck entering the new base site. According to Shimabukuro and others on the scene, as she was holding the side mirror of the stationary vehicle, three riot police officers tightly encircled her, unpeeled her fingers and then, in a tactic which demonstrators say is common, they simultaneously stepped back causing Shimabukuro to fall to the ground.

Knocked out, Shimabukuro was rushed to a local hospital and she says the injury has left her unable to sleep or stand without pain.

After hearing Eames's accusations, Shimabukuro threw down the gauntlet to the USMC.

"Before you say we Okinawans are pretending to be injured, come to Henoko and see

conditions with your own eyes. If you want to call me a liar then please come here and say it to my face."

### *3. Major Tim Kao, Camp Commander of the Northern Training Area*

The Yanbaru jungles in northern Okinawa are one of the most biodiverse areas in Japan and they provide the island with the majority of its drinking water. The Yanbaru also hosts the USMC Northern Training Area (NTA) where, since the 1950s, the Marines have been conducting jungle war games - and, in the 1960s, tests of Agent Orange.

Since 2007, residents of Takae district in Higashi village (bordering the NTA), have been attempting to block construction of Pentagon helipads which they believe will endanger their community.

According to reports in the [Okinawa media](#), on February 5, Major Tim Kao, Camp Commander of the NTA, accused demonstrators of being paid to be there.

Apparently, he also criticized Governor Onaga Takeshi as being supported by the island's communist party.

Kao made the comments in an interview with a visiting research student from Stockholm University.

Disparaging comments by U.S. officials on Okinawa are nothing new - for example, in 2010, Kevin Maher, a State Department official in charge of Japanese affairs, reportedly criticized Okinawans for being "[masters of manipulation and extortion](#)." However, what appears different this time is the lack of apology or censure from these men's superior officers.

This suggests two things: the Japanese government has exerted no pressure for an apology from the U.S. military because, in all likelihood, it condones their comments. Secondly, the U.S. military in Japan - and in particular the USMC - is becoming impatient with, what they feel, is the lenient approach taken by Japanese authorities towards peaceful demonstrators.

This impatience came to a head on February 22.

### Tactical arrests on February 22

-

For the past 18 years, Okinawans have maintained a sit-in demonstration on the shore of Henoko Bay; since last summer they have also built tents and held daily protests outside the gates of Camp Schwab. The largest of these demonstrations gather more than 2000 people - and even on weekdays, 100 or more people regularly attend.

Yamashiro Hiroji, the director of the Okinawa Peace Movement Center, is the most prominent figure in these demonstrations outside Camp Schwab. On site 24-hours a day, he leads chants, songs and organises food for the elderly

demonstrators.

*detain protesters if they crossed the yellow line.*

At around 9am on February 22, Yamashiro was arrested by base security guards. Claiming he had trespassed onto the base, they dragged him by his feet into the installation and accused him of breaking the Special Measures Concerning Criminal Cases Act.

*"It is impossible for guards to detain people based on their own judgment," the official said.*

Witnesses, however, say he had been pulled over the base's border demarcation line by the guards - or at worst, he had stepped a couple of paces over the boundary.

The newspaper also quoted the demonstrators' lawyers who said: "It was an arrest targeting the leader of the movement against the relocation (of the Futenma base). The action, aimed at intimidating the opposing group, was extremely unfair."

Yamashiro - and one more demonstrator - were kept on the base for 4 hours before being driven to Nago City's police station.

### Conclusion

Both men were released on February 23.

Upon being set free, Yamashiro told the assembled crowd of supporters, "I believe they arrested us just to annoy the opponents of the bases."

Prior to these recent developments, the U.S. military on Okinawa had attempted to distance itself from construction of the new base. For instance, it repeatedly referred to it as a Japanese government project and military officials have refused to comment on Tokyo brutality against demonstrators - dismissing such violence as a domestic policing matter.

Such arrests of Japanese citizens by base security guards is unprecedented on Okinawa - and many are questioning upon whose orders the arrests were made.

However these latest moves suggest that certain elements within the U.S. military are pressing for a more aggressive approach. What has prompted such a shift is not yet clear - but what is certain is that these moves have sharply escalated tensions between the military and the Okinawan communities which host more than half of U.S. forces in Japan.

On February 24, [Asahi Shimbun](#) reported,

*A senior official of the Okinawa headquarters of the All Japan Garrison Forces Labor Union, an organization consisting of Japanese working at U.S. bases, said the U.S. military likely instructed the security guards in advance to*

Governor Onaga Takeshi, Nago Mayor Inamine Susumu, and, according to polls, 80% of Okinawans are against construction of the new U.S. base.

Very likely, Pentagon accusations and arrests will only serve to strengthen this solidarity.

Parts of this article were originally published in The Japan Times in "[Injuries to Okinawa anti-base protesters 'laughable,' says U.S. military spokesman](#)" (Feb 9) and "[In appearance on far-right TV, U.S. official calls Okinawa base protests 'hate speech'](#)" (Feb 16).

*Jon Mitchell is a Welsh journalist based in Japan. He is the author of [Tsuiseki: Okinawa no Karehazai](#) (Chasing Agent Orange on Okinawa) (Koubunken 2014) and a visiting researcher at the International Peace Research Institute of Meiji Gakuin University, Tokyo. Mitchell is an Asia-Pacific Journal contributing editor.*

Asia-Pacific Journal articles on related themes include:

Herbert P. Bix, [Remembering the Konoe Memorial: the Battle of Okinawa and Its Aftermath](#)

C. Douglas Lummis, [Okinawa: State of Emergency](#)

C. Douglas Lummis, [The Bus to Henoko: Riot Police and Okinawan Citizens Face-off over New Marine Base](#)