

Ref. No.175

May, 2019

The Honorable William F. Hagerty
United States Ambassador to Japan

Prompt Suspension of Operations at Marine Corps Air Station Futenma

We appreciate the United States government for its tremendous contributions in maintaining the security of Japan, as well as the peace and stability in East Asia.

There are a number of U.S. military bases in Okinawa Prefecture and we recognize the positive contribution the Japan-U.S. Security Arrangements has had in Japan and the surrounding areas. I am writing this letter to request your consideration on the suspension of operations at MCAS Futenma located within our prefecture in Ginowan City.

The Okinawa Prefectural Government acknowledges the Japan-U.S. Security Arrangements; more than 70 years after World War II, however, over 70% of the military facilities exclusively used by the U.S. Forces in Japan remain on Okinawa, which only accounts for approximately 0.6% of the total land area in Japan. This is simply unacceptable, even in comparison with other 12 prefectures hosting U.S.-exclusive military facilities and cannot be tolerated.

More than 80% of prefectural residents, approximately 1.2 million people, reside in urban cities in the central and southern parts of the main island of Okinawa; U.S. military bases stand within 9 municipalities of these two locations and account for more than 22% of their land area.

Among these areas, there is Ginowan City, which has the approximate population density of Chicago at 12,085 people per square mile. MCAS Futenma is located in the urban areas of Ginowan City. Accidents and other incidents have been occurring constantly in the vicinity of MCAS Futenma, such as a CH-53D helicopter crashing into a building of Okinawa International University in 2004, and an aircraft part falling and landing on the premises of Futenma Daini Elementary School in 2017; these and other incidents have threatened the local residents' lives and property.

Hence, the Okinawa Prefectural Government has been demanding the closure and return of MCAS Futenma. In December 2013, we asked the government of Japan to suspend the air station's operations within five years in order to eliminate the dangers it

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poses; Prime Minister Abe affirmed that the operation of the air station would be terminated by February of 2019. Since the approval of the landfill of Henoko by former Governor Nakaima, we have demanded that the government of Japan should fulfill this promise in order to ensure immediate safety, regardless of the progress in Henoko. In cooperation with Ginowan City, we have continued to request that the central government of Japan eliminate the dangers posed by MCAS Futenma including prompt return and the suspension of operations within five years, and to work with the U.S. government to do so in the Council for Promoting the Alleviation of the Burden of Futenma Air Station, consisting of the central government, Okinawa Prefectural Government, and Ginowan City.

Instead of suspending operations at Futenma Air Station however, the United States has conducted training using visiting aircraft, which has raised great doubt whether the United States has been making serious efforts.

In accordance with the direct petition system stipulated under the Local Autonomy Act which is to complement indirect democracy, an ordinance was established responding to the petition filed by prefectural residents. Based on the ordinance, "The Prefectural Referendum Calling the Yeas and Nays on the Land Reclamation Work for the Construction of a U.S. Military Base in Henoko" was held in Okinawa Prefecture on February 24th, 2019. Approximately 72% of the total votes demonstrated their opposition against the land reclamation work in Henoko. Despite these results, the Japanese government has forcibly continued construction at Henoko amidst opposition by many prefectural residents, and has insisted that the relocation to Henoko is the only solution to eliminate the dangers posed by MCAS Futenma. The central government has not worked towards the suspension of airbase operations within five years, on the grounds that Okinawa Prefecture is not cooperative in the relocation to Henoko.

Although five years have passed since the December 2013 approval of reclamation work, the construction work for the reclamation of Henoko has been commenced for only 9 out of the total 22 seawalls. Additionally, the existence of soft ground underlying the relocation site, which is described as "soft as mayonnaise", has been confirmed. This finding suggests that soft seabed improvement work needs to be done as well. In consideration of these findings, Okinawa Prefectural Government has estimated that it will take over 13 years to complete the proposed relocation of MCAS Futenma to Henoko.

Furthermore, we have also estimated that the completion of the new base in Henoko will cost up to 2.55 trillion yen. This enormous total cost has not yet been shown to nor gained the understanding of the Diet as well as the public.

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These show that the completion of the new base in Henoko remains uncertain.

It has been discovered that the soft ground underlying the Henoko relocation site reaches a maximum depth of 90 meters. However, the ships that Japan possesses can only work at a depth of up to 70 meters below sea level. This imposes great concerns over the basic structure of foundation improvement work as deep as 90 meters below sea level. Furthermore, in past cases of reclamation work conducted on soft seabed in Japan, ground subsidence continued even decades after completion of construction. Putting this into consideration, even if the new Henoko base were completed, ground subsidence would likely continue even after its completion, which could consequently pose significant risks to base facilities including runways.

According to the section stipulating soil liquefaction countermeasures for the reclamation area in the Japanese government's plan which received reclamation approval, ground improvement work is planned only for aircraft runways. This means that once an earthquake occurs, all reclaimed areas other than runways would become liquefied and unusable as a military base. If a seawall collapses or suffers damage, the recovery of the landfill area is beyond feasible.

As stated, the existence of soft ground potentially impairs the Marine Corps readiness against foreign aggression.

Furthermore, it has been pointed out by experts that the seabed fault near the seawall construction sites, which is shown in the application document for reclamation approval created by the Japanese government, is an active fault.

Considering all the aforementioned factors, the Okinawa Prefectural Government believes that the relocation to Henoko does not bring about prompt elimination of the dangers posed by MCAS Futenma.

The United States government might see this situation as a domestic issue within Japan and think that the use of the airbase can be prolonged if the relocation to Henoko is infeasible. However, the situation surrounding what is described as "the most dangerous base in the world" still remains the same.

The United States and the residents of Okinawa share a history of having fiercely confronted one another across the fence when Okinawa was under U.S. administration. If the U.S. government continues to use the airbase, it may give rise to anti-base protests against all U.S. military bases in Okinawa, or even an overall anti-U.S. movement like what was seen in the past. If that happens, such movements would have a significant impact on the Japan-U.S. Security Arrangements as well as the Japan-U.S. Alliance including,

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operation of Kadena Air Base and White Beach Naval Facility.

We believe that it would be a wise measure to relocate training and aircraft stationed at MCAS Futenma to other existing facilities within and outside of Japan in order to eliminate the dangers it poses. Unfortunately, the February 2019 deadline has passed without a suspension of operations within five years. We request that the U.S. Government have a sincere discussion and dialogue with the Japanese government concerning this issue, as well as review internally the immediate suspension of operations.

It is our firm belief that the United States is capable of handling issues surrounding China and North Korea only with the U.S. Navy and the U.S. Air Force. We also believe that “Great America” that President Trump wishes to bring back will make a wise choice of not only suspending operations at MCAS Futenma, but also relocating it from Okinawa to other facilities outside of Okinawa, or outside of Japan.

For these reasons, we would like to ask you to make steps towards the suspension of operations at MCAS Futenma and forward this letter to President Trump.

Sincerely,

Denny Tamaki
Governor of Okinawa Prefecture

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