

October 15, 2003

Dear Mr. President of the United States,

Please allow me to introduce myself. I am the mayor of the city of Ginowan, Okinawa, which hosts the United States Marine Corps Futenma Air Base. There was an agreement between the United States and Japanese governments regarding the total return of the base. However, the base has not been returned. I feel compelled to explain the current situation concerning the Futenma Air Base, and I will send this letter to you, although I am fully aware that it may be out of protocol.

This year is the one hundred fiftieth anniversary of the first visit by United States Navy Admiral Perry and one hundred ninety seamen to the Ryukyu Kingdom. The visit was the beginning of relations between the United States and Okinawa. Commodore Matthew Perry surveyed various areas in the Ryukyu Kingdom and his sketches of the village of Ginowan are still preserved.

After the first encounter with the United States one hundred fifty years ago, the Meiji Government of Japan absorbed the Ryukyu Kingdom and the Prefecture of Okinawa was created. At the beginning of the twentieth century, many Okinawan people migrated to Hawaii to work on sugar cane farms. This was the second encounter between the United States and Okinawa.

However, as the US-Japan relations deteriorated, migration to the United States from Okinawa was terminated and, finally, the Pearl Harbor Attack in December, 1941, began the Pacific War. Although at the beginning of the war, Japan occupied a large area ranging from Taiwan, the Korean Peninsula, Manchuria, the Philippines, the Malay Peninsula, to the South Pacific Islands, continuous defeats had forced Japan to surrender many of these territories.

The last land battle of the World War II and the Pacific War was fought on Okinawa from April to July, 1945. This three-month war was the third encounter between the United States and Okinawa.

The third encounter was the most unfortunate one for both the United States and Okinawa. During the battle of Okinawa, more than 500,000 soldiers were mobilized and

12,500 of them were killed in battle. The number of Japanese military casualties reached 66,000, while Okinawan civilian casualties added up to 122,000. Of these civilian deaths, 94,000 were non-combatant civilian population and 28,000 were male and female Okinawa natives and students who were classified as Japanese soldiers and military employees. All the known names of the victims of the battle of Okinawa were engraved on the Peace Memorial in the Southern part of Okinawa Main Island, regardless of their nationality. Okinawa was destroyed by the severe bombardment from both sea and land, which was called "Iron Storm". After the destruction, Okinawa came to be called "Rock Island". The United States built many military bases in various parts of Okinawa. The construction of bases started during the war and continued throughout the occupation era. Okinawan people did not have any right to refuse base construction.

Until the beginning of the post WWII era, the United States military seized residential buildings, agriculture fields and graveyards while the owners of those lands were interned in concentration camps. After the United States secured sufficient land to build military bases, Okinawan people returned to the remaining land. However, the United States kept seizing land from Okinawan people in order to build up military for the cold war efforts.

The vast United States military bases still existing today were built in this manner. Underneath those bases are buried many villages and in those villages are many sites of worship and graveyards. On October 4, 2003, residents of the Makihara Ward of the village of Yomitan celebrated the religious ceremony called "Ugan" in the Kadena Base for the first time in fifty-eight years. Until this year, the residents had been forced to have this ceremony outside of the base, because of the severe restriction regarding the entry to bases.

This is the reality of Okinawa. People had to wait for fifty-eight years to carry out their traditional religious ceremonies. Similar situations exist in many base areas.

The United States Marine Corps Futenma Air Base, which is located in today's city of Ginowan, was built in the same manner. The United States ground forces landed on nearby Chatan village on April 1, 1945. They occupied most of the current Ginowan city area within a week. In June, the United States began the construction of an air base to be used for air raids on the Japanese main islands. The base is located on the flat land in the middle of the city.

In the Futenma base area, there was located the town hall, schools, and the central area of the village of Ginowan. Many civilian houses, agriculture fields, and graveyards were bulldozed for the base construction. Even today, some graveyards are found during construction in the base. Some parts of the base fences were built on the buried graveyards. Many sanctuaries, worship sites, and graveyards remain in the Futenma Base and the local residents cannot visit these places without special permission by the United States.

People of Okinawa have been enduring such conditions. Only because of the traditional values of Okinawa, such as politeness and hardworking, kept people from violent resistance under such severe depletion of human rights. Commodore Perry praised Okinawan people as such one hundred-fifty years ago.

However, it is the responsibility of the United States to recognize the fact that the vast military bases exist because of the sacrifice of Okinawan people and the legacy of the battle of Okinawa. It is also the United States' responsibility to improve the situation regarding the military bases.

Futenma Air Base occupies the central part of Ginowan city. It is surrounded by residential areas, so the US helicopters and aircrafts fly over schools, kindergartens, hospitals and many residential houses. They fly very low when they takeoff and land. Noise pollution has caused serious health problems. In addition, the flights stir continuous fears of accident in the minds of the Ginowan residents.

Noise pollution is not the only problem US bases cause. First and foremost, there have been many crimes committed by the US soldiers and their family members. In particular, sexual offenses against Okinawa women persist from the post WWII era to today. There was an unusually heinous crime in 1995 and the protest rally against this incident was held in Ginowan city. 85,000 people participated in the rally. A female high school student from Ginowan made an appeal for a "Quieter Okinawa".

After this rally, the governments of Japan and the United States organized the Special Action Committee on Okinawa (SACO) in order to plan the reduction of the US base burden on Okinawa. As a result, SACO's final report on December 2, 1996 agreed on the total return of Futenma air base within five to seven years.

Despite the SACO agreement, the return of the Futenma Air Base has been delayed, with the deadline of December 2, 2003, approaching. The current plan to build a replacement base will take at least sixteen more years and the return date will be pushed back to 2019, which is twenty-three years after the SACO agreement in 1996.

Is this really the answer by the United States government to the people of Okinawa? The original intention to return Futenma Base to Okinawa has been lost. Does the United States government want to force Okinawan people, whom Commodore Perry described as "extremely polite", to endure even more hardship?

The nearby residents of Futenma Air Base have already endured seven years of suffering after 1996 SACO agreement. Although the agreement was based on the shared concerns over noise pollution and the danger of accidents, the number of flights has increased by 10,000 times a year during the past seven years. The flight increase occurred over residential areas and the suffering from the noise has become even more serious. Some areas routinely see more than 100 flights a day. Some other areas even observed 200 or more flights a day for twenty-nine days during 2002.

The situation is expressed in many complaints filed to the city on the noise pollution. The following are examples of such complaints: "Helicopters circulate every two minutes. They fly just above our roof and our child cannot sleep well."; "The night time noise is so severe that our child cannot sleep."; "The base noise drives me crazy. There is much training until late night. I cannot stand the noise any longer."; and "Night time training continues from late afternoon to evening. I am afraid of a nervous breakdown."

The City of Ginowan has started a plan to realize the closure and the return of Futenma Air Base within five years, in order to break through the status quo that keeps Ginowan residents in hardship.

I would like to ask your understanding and ask you to consider inclusion of the Futenma Air Base in the plan of overseas base closures beginning in 2005 in accordance with the Military Base Closure Act.

Lastly, I wish happiness and health to Mr. and Mrs. President George W. Bush.

Sincerely yours,

Iha, Yo-ichi

The Mayor of the City of Ginowan, Okinawa, Japan