

# On Okinawa, Locals Want US Troops to Leave

Public Broadcasting Service

Introduction by Steve Rabson

In recent years the American media has covered the grossly disproportionate U.S. military presence in Okinawa mostly following such atrocities as the rape of a twelve-year-old girl by three American servicemen in 1995, and the 2016 rape and murder of a twenty-year-old woman for which a former Marine, employed by the U.S. military at the time, is charged. However, the New York Times and Washington Post have published occasional articles about the ongoing protests in Okinawa against the planned Marine airbase at Henoko, and critics of American foreign policy have reported on them. The broadcast that follows is unusual in that it aired on PBS and offers multiple perspectives on the bases.

The PBS Newshour segment below includes interviews with the Marine commander in Okinawa, who insists the bases are a strategic necessity in the face of "global threats," but it also interviews an Okinawan who thinks they make Okinawa, a likely target of attack in a war, "less safe." Also interviewed is a man whose father made so much money from his restaurant catering to American servicemen during the "Vietnam War boom" in Okinawa that "all of us nine children were able to go to university." Another local resident condemns the environmental devastation the bases cause, and Governor Onaga wants "all Japanese to shoulder the burden."



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Okinawa remained under U.S. military occupation with a grossly disproportionate military presence for twenty years after mainland Japan regained its sovereignty in 1952 because the U.S. claimed this was necessitated by "Communist threats to peace and security in the Far East." Most Okinawa residents consider this presence dangerous, disruptive, and a barrier to economic development.

**HARI SREENIVASAN:** North Korean dictator Kim Jong Un recently said his goal is to reach an "equilibrium of real force" with the United States and dissuade talk of U.S. military action against his regime. And that he wants to finish his nuclear weapons program despite sanctions.

Kim's comment comes after North Korea test-fired a ballistic missile over northern Japan for the second time.

North Korea's state-run media released this video, which shows the missile launch along with these photos of Kim watching it.

The North Korean threat — and China's assertiveness in the South China Sea — underscore how Japan still relies on the U.S. military for protection, just as it has since the end of World War II.

Earlier this month, Defense Secretary Jim Mattis said the U.S. will work with Japan to enhance its missile defenses, and the U.S. commitment to defend Japan remains, quote, "ironclad."

In tonight's Signature Segment, NewsHour Weekend Special Correspondent Amy Guttman reports from the Japanese island of Okinawa on how U.S. bases there are a cause of concern to many residents.

**MARK WAYCASTER:** "And then, on April 1st at 0530 in the morning..."

**AMY GUTTMAN:** U.S. Marine Mark Waycaster leads tours of the 1945 Battle of Okinawa every week.

**MARK WAYCASTER:** "We dropped 4-thousand 5-hundred tons of ordnance on that beach."

**AMY GUTTMAN:** Okinawa was the bloodiest battle in the Pacific during World War II. Fourteen thousand Americans were killed, as were 150-thousand Japanese military and civilians. And U.S. troops never left. The American soldiers have been the cornerstone of the post-World War II pact to protect a demilitarized Japan. U.S. troops deployed from Okinawa to fight the wars in Korea and Vietnam. Soldiers came back for rest and relaxation. The troops also provide economic security. Nine thousand Okinawans work on the bases, and many more, at businesses supporting them. Emblems of the fused culture are all over the island.

**TOMOTERU TAMARI:** In this area, there were more than 100 bars.

**AMY GUTTMAN:** Tomoteru Tamari's family owned a restaurant that thrived during the more lucrative years of the Vietnam War.

**TOMOTERU TAMARI:** My father, he became so prosperous that all of us nine children were able to go to university, thanks to the U.S. base.

**AMY GUTTMAN:** But those benefits are outweighed for most Okinawans by a feeling of endless military occupation. After Japan surrendered in World War II, Okinawa was kept under American military rule for more than two decades. Residents of the island only won the right to elect their own governor in 1968. Today, there are twenty-nine thousand troops on Okinawa, more than half of the 56-thousand U.S. troops still stationed in Japan. One of the U.S. military bases, Futenma Air Station sits in a dense urban area right in the middle of the island.

**LAWRENCE NICHOLSON:** Marine Lieutenant General Lawrence Nicholson is the highest-ranking U.S. military officer on Okinawa. He says today's global threats make the mission here as relevant as ever.

We have China, North Korea, Russia and the violent extremism that is occurring today in Mindanao of the Philippines. The location here, a couple hundred miles south of Japan puts us centrally located to be able to respond quickly. Very, very quickly to a Korean scenario from here to a defense of all of our allies.

**AMY GUTTMAN:** Okinawa's location within two hours flight time to the Korean Peninsula, three hours to Russia make it both vulnerable and valuable to the U.S.

**LAWRENCE NICHOLSON:** Certainly, we're concerned about the longer range missiles. Kim Jong Un has launched more missiles in his

short time than his father and grandfather, combined. So the obsession with weaponizing and delivering nuclear weapons has caused us significant concern.

**AMY GUTTMAN:** Japan shares the burden of the costs of U.S. deployment. It pays the U.S. \$1.7 billion dollars a year for the protection, about a-third of the 5-and-half billion the military spends in the whole country. The Japanese government in Tokyo also sends Okinawa funds for hosting the Americans.

Despite the government subsidies and spending by military personnel, the majority of Okinawans want the American troops to leave. One of the biggest complaints — nearly six thousand crimes committed by U.S. military personnel since 1972, according to police records. When three U.S. servicemen abducted and raped a twelve-year old girl in 1995, public outrage soared and propelled talks to reduce troop levels on the island. In 2014, the crime rate for the U.S military personnel on Okinawa reached a historic low. But last year residents were reminded of past brutalities when a U.S. military contractor raped and murdered a 20-year old woman.

How do you explain these atrocities?

**LAWRENCE NICHOLSON:** You can't explain it. We were as shocked and horrified by the incident as anyone. The fact that it was an American civilian working on a base that had committed this was devastating. We have an obligation to be better.

**AMY GUTTMAN:** That pledge is little solace for Kinjo Takemasa. His mother managed a bar near a base in the northern part of Okinawa. In 1974, she died when a U.S. Marine hit her in the head with a brick during a robbery.

**KINJO TAKEMASA:** I used to think the U.S. Military was helping to revitalize our town. But it was an illusion, because I became a victim.

**AMY GUTTMAN:** Six days a week, protesters gather outside this base to complain about the military presence, including the noise and the safety risks of U.S. aircraft flying above. V-22 Ospreys take off from Futenma Air Station every day. The controversial and accident-prone aircraft takes off like a helicopter and flies like a plane. They cruise over homes, hospitals, and schools. Practically next door, Professor Masa'aki Tomochi teaches international relations at the University of Ryukyu.

How regularly do you hear planes taking off and landing?

**MASA'AKI TOMOCHI:** Every day from the morning to the night time, actually.

**AMY GUTTMAN:** Six months ago, one Osprey crashed in Okinawa. Okinawa Governor Takeshi Onaga is leading the fight to reduce the American military presence.

**TAKESHI ONAGA:** We depend on security from U.S. Military bases in this country, but the Japanese Government, they are willing to locate all the bases in Okinawa. I can't tolerate this over-concentration of U.S. bases.

**AMY GUTTMAN:** Onaga calls it an over-concentration, because Okinawa represents less than one percent of Japan's land. Yet, 64 percent of the Japanese land used for U.S. bases is on the island. Since his election three years ago, he's tried to block construction in this picturesque, sparsely populated area in the northern part of the island called Henoko Bay, where a new base would replace Futenma Air Station.

**AMY GUTTMAN:** So what do you see as the solution?

**TAKESHI ONAGA:** I'd like all Japanese to shoulder the burden of hosting U.S. bases. When I speak with people coming from mainland Japan, I say, 'why don't you host U.S.

military bases in your hometown?’

**AMY GUTTMAN:** The U.S. has agreed to reduce its presence in Okinawa by relocating nine thousand Marines to bases in Guam, Australia, Hawaii and other American states. But there’s no fixed timeline for that to happen. The military has returned twelve-thousand acres of land once used for bases and training to the Okinawan government with three-thousand more acres promised. Professor Tomochi sees more risks than rewards in relocating Futenma Air Station.

You don’t see its strategic value?

**MASA’AKI TOMOCHI:** If the U.S. and Japan think that their potential enemy is China, for example, if China launched missile to U.S. military bases in Japan, including Okinawa, you know, it’s useless.

**AMY GUTTMAN:** So do you feel more safe or less safe with the military here?

**MASA’AKI TOMOCHI:** Less safe. It means we became a target.

**AMY GUTTMAN:** Most Okinawans oppose a new airfield in Henoko Bay, but construction has begun, and the Japanese government is footing the bill. Kinjo Takemasa has been among those protesting the project and its environmental impact.

**KINJO TAKEMASA:** This is sacred ocean for me. A sanctuary. I became a protester, because the U.S. base destroyed nature.

**AMY GUTTMAN:** Businessman Tomoteru Tamari, whose father owned that thriving restaurant, is among the minority of Okinawans who support the new airfield as do local officials, hoping it will revive the area’s fortunes.

**TOMOTERU TAMARI:** Some residents who had moved out are starting to move back. There’s hope the population will increase and create a better environment for children, better education.

**AMY GUTTMAN:** But Okinawa’s government says the island would be better off with more private development. It says this town, built on land reclaimed from the U.S. military and now home to an entertainment and shopping complex, has an economic impact 100 times greater than the base that was here before. Okinawans would like to replicate that success, turning more prime real estate used by the military into valuable destinations for commerce and tourism like this beach, where the U.S. Marines first landed in 1945.

*This PBS program was broadcast on September 16, 2017.*

**Steve Rabson** is Professor Emeritus of East Asian Studies, Brown University and an Asia-Pacific Journal contributing editor. His books include [Southern Exposure: Modern Japanese Literature from Okinawa](#), co-edited with Michael Molasky (University of Hawaii Press, 2000), [The Okinawan Diaspora in Japan: Crossing the Borders Within](#) (University of Hawaii Press, 2012) and [Islands of Protest: Japanese Literature from Okinawa](#), co-edited with Davinder Bhowmik (University of Hawaii Press, 2016). He was stationed in Okinawa as a U.S. Army draftee in 1967-68.