Volume 13 | Issue 3 | Number 1 | Article ID 4816 | Jan 19, 2015

The Bus to Henoko: Riot Police and Okinawan Citizens Face-off over New Marine Base 辺野古へのバス　機動隊と沖縄県民、新海兵隊基地を前に対決

C. Douglas Lummis

Japanese Translation (日本語)

Naha, Okinawa, 17 January. Yesterday I took a bus up to Henoko from Naha, where I live. There is a new organisation called Shimagurumi Kaigi, formed to support the newly elected Governor in his "all Okinawa anti-base" campaign. Since "all-Okinawa" includes progressives, pacifists, business people, and politicians who recently broke away from the pro-base Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), they will, I hear, need to do a whole lot of talking among themselves before they agree on much more than a few simple issues. But they have agreed on at least one project: to set up a daily bus service to carry people to the main gate of the US Marine Corps' Camp Schwab, at Henoko, where construction of the new Marine Corps Air Facility has resumed after a break of a month or so. At the main gate a 24-hour sit-in is aiming to block the big trucks that are bringing in equipment and building materials. The buses leave at 10:00AM, one from Naha, one from Okinawa City and one from Uruma City.

I arrived early, and sat on a bench watching the people gather. In Okinawa, most of the people who participate in these actions are old folks, gray-haired if not bald. There are two reasons for this. One, this is the generation who remembers the Battle of Okinawa, hates war viscerally, and is most offended by the US base presence here. Two, as the various anti-base actions (mainly at Futenma Base in Central Okinawa and Camp Schwab in the North) are mostly on working days, it makes sense for retired people to be at the front. So there's a kind of division of labor.

As I waited, a woman came over and began talking. She told me she had memories of the war, but for decades after 1945 had refused to think about it. She told me that her family had followed instructions and committed suicide - she made a gesture at her throat but I didn't understand if she meant rope or knife. She, a little girl then, was afraid, ran away, and survived. About ten years ago, she said, she began suffering from the trauma: nightmares, depression, headaches. Now she takes medication to sleep. And I suppose participating in the sit-in also serves as therapy. There are a lot of people in Okinawa with stories like hers.

On the bus people were quiet at first, except the two organisers who made announcements. One of the organisers began preparing to give us a rundown on the situation, but then she looked into our faces, realised we had all been there before, and thought better of it. Then they began leading us in songs. Printed song sheets were passed out, and I heard for the first time brand new songs on themes like what's wrong with the new base plan, let's all sit in at Henoko, and so on. I have to say it was pretty far off-key, but quite wonderful. We

arrived at Camp Schwab Main Gate singing.

There were already maybe a hundred people there; if so, we would have brought it up to around a hundred fifty. About seventy-five, I heard, had been there all night. Most of the people were sitting or standing opposite the gate, on the other side of the road that runs parallel to the chain-link-and-barbed-wire fence surrounding the base. There were two riot police buses parked just inside the gate; the riot policemen took turns standing in groups of eight or ten on each side of the entrance, trying to look fierce. The work of directing traffic at the gate was being done by civilian guardsmen. As there were no trucks or equipment related to new construction trying to enter the base, and as it is the policy of the demonstrators not to interfere with the regular functioning of the base, everything was peaceful.

The mood-maker there is a man named Yamashiro Hiroji, the head of Okinawa's Peace Center, who has earned himself the awkward but appropriate name Mister Before-the-gate (Misutaa Geetomae). He stays at the gate twenty-four hours a day, sometimes, it is said, for weeks at a time. During the day he often holds the microphone for hours on end, making speeches, haranguing the police and guardsmen, singing, leading the group in the chanting of slogans. (Looking at the faces of the guardsmen as he spoke, I had the impression that at least some of them were affected by this. But not the riot police.) At night he is at the forefront of the attempt physically to block the trucks from entering the base; the trucks have generally been coming in after midnight. I asked him when he sleeps; he said, "Yes, that is a problem."

So the relatively peaceful daylight hours are deceptive. One of the people who had been there all night told me what had happened the night before. There are two entrances on that side of the base. The one we were at is for military use. The other one, just 100 meters down the road, is the industrial entrance, which the trucks are supposed to use. For a gate it has an accordion-like contraption that folds up sideways in both directions on casters. I remember noticing before that the triangles that open up in it when the gate is shut are big enough for a person to crawl through. And it seems that's what people began doing the night before we arrived, moving a substantial part of their sit-in to the other side of the fence. The riot police, using the method here called *gobo-nuki* (the *gobo* is a tuber that's very hard to pull out of the ground) they dragged everybody out. Then they went someplace - my guess is the base junk pile - and collected an assortment of old metal fences, wire mesh, baling wire, screen, and netting, and made the gate impenetrable. They wired the metal fence to the accordion gate so you can't crawl through it, and they rigged up a second fence behind that in case you climbed over it. The whole thing has the look of a Secret Hideaway built by fourth-graders. Yet it works: the people can't sneak in any more. But the trucks can't get in either; there's only room enough for one pedestrian at a time. So one important gate has been made unavailable to the trucks. The other gate is for military use; trucks aren't supposed to use it. In the morning, before we got there, the Okinawan workers who regularly come in trucks to work on the base - gardeners, plumbers, mechanics I suppose - couldn't get in the industrial entrance, were turned away from the military entrance, and went home.

A small victory. Small, because while I haven't been able to confirm this from the newspapers, I assume that with the help of the riot police, the big trucks again managed to get through

that night.

Japanese riot police have a different mode of operation from, for example, American riot squads. If this action were happening in the US probably the police would be smashing heads and making arrests by now. Japanese riot police dominate with numbers. When they come, they come by the hundreds. If one person, say, stands in front of a truck and refuses to move, five or six policemen will crowd around and immobilise her (at Henoko, most likely her) in a kind of human strait jacket, then move her out of the way. It looks a little like a rugby scrum. It doesn't make as violent a picture as pounding heads with nightsticks, but people get hurt. Two women in their 80s have recently been taken away in ambulances after being knocked over and having their heads smashed into the pavement. Some people believe that the riot police have a trick of pressing on a person from all sides, then those on one side suddenly stepping aside to allow the person to fall. It sounds possible.

Taira Etsumi, a protester in her 80s, taken away by medics

after being knocked down by riot police.

To get the trucks through, the police have been detaining people briefly, but not arresting them. (There was one arrest a couple of days ago when, according to the paper, a fellow allegedly smacked a policeman over the head with his plastic water bottle.) People here believe that the no-arrest policy comes from the Abe Administration in Tokyo. Since these confrontations began last autumn, news about them has been almost entirely kept out of the mainland Japanese newspapers, not to mention TV. Most people living in Japan have no idea that this is going on. And the Government hopes to keep it that way. If arrests begin, especially arrests of large numbers of people, this press silence will surely be broken. I suspect this situation must be very frustrating

to the policemen: they can issue commands, they can push you around, but they can't use their principal weapon, which is arrest.

Anyway, as it seemed there was going to be no action at the gate, Yamashiro-san led us around the edge of the base and down to the beach, from where we could see the action at sea. The base has one side facing Oura Bay, and they mean to build the new airstrip by reclaiming offshore land there, that is by dumping a mountain of dirt down over the garden of coral that is there. They have cordoned off a large area with floats, and have begun preparations inside it. Opponents - these mostly younger people - have trained themselves in the use of sea kayaks, and paddle around outside the cordon looking for a chance to slip over it and get inside. These are opposed by the Coast Guard, which uses the same tactics as the riot police: massive numbers. They come in big heavy-duty rubber boats powered with twin outboard engines and equipped with cameras, telescopes, loudspeakers, scuba tanks, hooks, ropes and who knows what else. They reach out and drag intruders from their kayaks and into the rubber boats, take them away from the area, and eventually release them to one of the larger boats that the protesters use. So they too avoid arrest, though they would probably have legal grounds for arrest: trespassing.

When we got to the beach, we saw sitting offshore a line of quite large Coast Guard ships, all gleaming white, all facing the shore. I counted nine; people with better eyesight claimed to count twelve. The next day's paper says 17 sea kayaks, and a total of 23 people were detained by the Coast Guard that day, to which end the government deployed twelve large ships and maybe close to twenty rubber boats, with presumably lots more on the ships being held in reserve. If their strategy is to discourage the protesters with this overwhelming performance, it is not working.

In the bus on the way back, the people passed round the microphone and gave their impressions. They were mostly upbeat, saying that staying at home and reading the newspaper or watching local TV they get so upset they can't sit or stand, as the saying has it, and that coming to Henoko had energised them. When my turn came I decided to try an experiment, test the waters as it were, and see if enough time had elapsed since the election that we could break out of PC talk and have a political discussion. I said I also felt some relief coming to Henoko, but only some. Because what I learned, or reconfirmed, is that continuing this action twenty-four hours a day for three months is, given that this is Okinawa, possible, but altogether too hard. We are all waiting for Governor Onaga to announce either the annulment (torikeshi) or retraction (tekkai) of the reclamation permit the previous turncoat governor gave to the government. The Governor says studying the question might take three months. But that's entirely too long. (applause) I can understand why an annulment might require three months study; it has to be based on good legal grounds so it can survive a court challenge. But a retraction he could do today or tomorrow. It is a political decision. It doesn't require expert opinion. The Governor can make that decision based on the fact that he was elected by people who want him to make it. So let's use every way we can to urge him to do that as soon as possible. (applause)

Immediately a man of middle age took the mike and said he supported the idea. He said he had stayed on the site, sleeping in the tent, for three days and nights. Or trying to sleep. It had rained, the tent had leaked, and on the third night he had coughed all night. So he had given up and gone home for a rest, after which he had joined us in the bus only for a day trip.

His story made the point clear: three months of this and a lot of people are going to wreck their health.

A woman took the mike and asked how, exactly, can we influence the governor. I was in the middle of talking about phone calls and letters to the editor when Yui Akiko, a retired newspaperwoman and well-known activist, took the mike from me and said, I have been asked to be one of the directors of Shimagurumi Kaigi (the organisation that provided the bus). Shimagurumi Kaigi has just been founded, and is looking for things to do. If you agree, I can take a message from you to the next meeting, and tell them that there was this discussion in one of their buses, and the passengers are asking them to use their influence to urge the Governor to hurry up and retract the reclamation permit. (this also got applause)

At first it was proposed that someone draw up a statement and we all sign it, but it turned out that there was not 100% agreement: one woman took the mike and said in effect, look, we just got done electing this man, shouldn't we give him the benefit of the doubt and assume he knows what he is doing? At that point the bus entered Naha, and we were running out of time. The petition idea was abandoned, and Yui-san said she would anyway report on our discussion to the next meeting, and urge them to take action.

With that we disbanded. I don't know if anything will come of Yui-san's efforts, but I would not be surprised if it yields results; she is a powerful personality and well respected. But also I can say that for this forty-some people, looking critically at what Governor Onaga is or is not doing was not a taboo. No one got angry or used the word 'divisive'. Almost everybody agreed that this was an area where Onaga could benefit from some advice. If, in its readiness to take the initiative, this group is in any way representative, it suggests that while its most visible form has been a series of elections, the huge political and cultural realignment going on now in Okinawa remains principally a grass-roots phenomenon.

C. Douglas Lummis, a former US Marine stationed on Okinawa and a present resident of Okinawa, is the author of Radical Democracy and other books in Japanese and English. A Japan Focus contributing editor, he formerly taught at Tsuda College.

Asia-Pacific journal articles on related themes:

Gavan McCormack, Storm Ahead: Okinawa's Outlook for 2015

Inamine Susumu, Nago Mayor Inamine's Concise Guide to What's Wrong with the Planned Marine Airbase

Maki Sunagawa and Daniel Broudy, Selling the Henoko Base and the Future of Okinawa