The View from Okinawa: 
Women and US Military Bases
Focus on the Status of Forces Agreement

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People often say that you can see the effects of the US-Japan Security Treaty most clearly from Okinawa, but the viewpoint of Okinawan women brings them into even sharper focus. Though it is now thirty years since Okinawa was returned to Japan, seventy-five percent of all US military installations are still located on the islands. Okinawans continue to suffer from the contradictions between the US-Japan Security Treaty and domestic Japanese law.

Noise Pollution

The central area of the main island of Okinawa has the greatest concentration of US military facilities, including Kadena Air Base, the largest US Air Force installation in the Far East. In February 1982, residents of six towns and villages in the area, including Okinawa City and Kadena Town, instigated legal proceedings to protest noise pollution from Kadena Air Base. At the trial, they requested “a ban on night test flights between the hours of 7 pm and 7 am,” “a ban on the emission of noise exceeding 65 phons between the hours of 7 am and 7 pm,” and ”compensation for past and future damages due to noise pollution.”

By the time they graduate from high school, children in this area are said to lose one full year of class time due to the roar of jets flying overhead.

Daily life is constantly bombarded by noise, affecting citizens both physically and mentally. A disproportionately high number of premature births and low birth weights are recorded among babies born to local women. Over fifty years of subjection to high levels of noise has resulted in countless cases of hearing loss. In a three-year study conducted by Okinawa Prefecture beginning in 1995, eight people were diagnosed that the cause of their hearing-impairment was definitely noise from Kadena Air Base, (particularly in the nearby coastal region of Chatan). The judge, citing the “foreign immunity” doctrine, refused to ban night test flights, despite this medical evidence.

Problems Concerning Nationality, “International Marriage,” and Divorce

According to the statistics provided by the Okinawan Prefectural Military Base Affairs Office (which deals with base-related problems), as of September 2001, the total number of military personnel, civilian employees of the military, and family members located in Okinawa were as follows:

- Civilian employees: 1,355
- Family members: 23,337

This comes to a total of 49,279. The census for 2000 found the total population to be 1,193,768, which means that American military personnel, employees of the military, and their civilian family members constitute 4.1% of the population of the main island of Okinawa.

The Dynamic Statistics of Population
compiled by the Ministry of Health and Welfare show there are 200 to 300 marriages (1991 - 1998), and 40 to 80 divorces (1992 - 1998) each year between American men and Japanese women in Okinawa Prefecture. These figures represent 80-90% of all marriages and divorces between non-Japanese men and Japanese women per year in Okinawa Prefecture. Compared to statistics for Japan as a whole, the percentage of all marriages (including those between Japanese) filed by marriages between American men and Japanese women is 15 times higher in Okinawa Prefecture, and the percentage of all divorces, 14 times higher.

In addition, of the total number of births for 1998, 1.47% of babies in Okinawa were born to American fathers and Japanese mothers, which is a rate 13 times higher than for the Japanese population as a whole. Many problems arise in Okinawa due to this high rate of international marriages.

According to Japanese law, a Japanese national giving birth on American soil must file an Application for the Reservation of Citizenship at the nearest Japanese Embassy or Consulate within three months of birth, or the child’s Japanese nationality cannot be guaranteed (The Nationality Law, Article 12; The Family Registration Law, Article 104, Item 1). If this procedure is not followed, the parents must apply to the Minister of Justice, and complete the paperwork necessary to have the child’s Japanese nationality reinstated (The Nationality Law, Article 17, Item 1).

The following two points are of particular importance here. The first is that “the child must have completed the process of Alien Registration,” and the second, that if the child is under 15, his or her guardian must submit the application (The Nationality Law, Article 18). If the mother is submitting the application, she must have the consent of the father who shares parental custody of the child.”

The issue of the father’s consent is a particular problem, because in reality, the father himself is required to report to the Local Civil Affairs Bureau, which often makes reinstatement of the child’s nationality very difficult. Furthermore, many parents are not aware of the requirement to file an application at the Japanese Embassy or Consulate. Even if they are, they often fail to do so because the nearest Embassy or Consulate is too far away.

In addition, since non-Japanese entering Japan under the Status of Forces Agreement are exempt from the requirement to complete Alien Registration procedures, bi-national children born in America are sometimes unable to get Japanese nationality. Thus, many problems
stem from the fact that in Okinawa, the Status of Forces Agreement supercedes Japanese domestic law.

**Conclusion**

Due to the existence of American military bases in Okinawa, local police are subject to restrictions under the Status of Forces Agreement, which often hinder investigations of crimes committed by military personnel, civilian employees of the military, and their family members. When such cases are brought to trial, the SOFA often gives privileges to the perpetrators rather than to the victims.

The Constitution of Japan clearly states that the sovereign power resides with the people of Japan, their fundamental human rights are guaranteed, and that the right of belligerence of the state is not recognized. The Constitution thus runs counter to the Status of Forces Agreement and the US-Japan Security Treaty on which it is based, for the US-Japan Security Treaty is, in fact, a military alliance. This fundamental contradiction leaves women in Okinawa exposed to a wide range of dangers and abuse.

The Japanese government often says that American bases are necessary to protect Japan. These words remind me of what the government told us at the time of the Battle of Okinawa: that the Japanese military would protect us. And then I remember that summer of 1945: innocent civilians being chased out of shelters by Japanese soldiers to die as they tried to escape the fighting; people who contracted malaria and died as a result of military orders; young girls duped into sexual slavery by the Japanese military. How can anyone say the military protected the citizens of Okinawa?

Thinking of the Battle of Okinawa helps us to see, from an Okinawan point of view, the US-Japan Security Treaty, which affirms the existence of a military presence on Japanese soil. Is the Status of Forces Agreement and all the special laws it entails, which are based on this Treaty, really protecting the people – or the women – of Okinawa? The answer should be perfectly obvious.

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