

Thousands Protest New U.S. Base Plan in Japan



Tokyo, May 25 (RHC)-- Thousands of Japanese demonstrators have staged a massive rally, protesting the planned construction of a new U.S. airbase on the southern island of Okinawa. Organizers of the demonstration said about 15,000 people formed a human chain around the parliament building in the Japanese capital, Tokyo, on Sunday.

They held placards and banners with messages such as "No to Henoko" and chanted slogans against the establishment of a controversial U.S. airbase in the southern Japanese island. Henoko is a small coastal area on Okinawa Island where Washington plans to relocate the existing Futenma military facility.

The massive demonstrations on Sunday aimed to ramp up pressure on the Japanese government to halt building work for the military base. The protesters also strongly criticized the Tokyo government that is apparently ignoring local residents. "We must stop this construction," media outlets quoted one of the protesters at the rally as saying, adding, "The government is trying to force the plan no matter how strongly Okinawa says 'no' to it."

The angry demonstrators also expressed opposition to Washington's planned deployment of CV-22 Osprey aircraft at U.S. Yokota Air Base in Tokyo. The United States announced plans to move the Futenma airbase in 1996, hoping to ease tensions with the host community.

The decision to move Futenma to the less-populated coastal area of Henoko in Nago City was also raised during Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's recent week-long visit to Washington where he and U.S. President Barack Obama agreed to initiate the construction of a new base in Okinawa.

But local residents have long opposed the presence of US troops in the island. The deep-rooted resentment against the U.S. in Okinawa boiled over in 1995 when US soldiers brutally raped an elementary schoolgirl, triggering mass rallies and violence across Japan.

U.S. troops have been involved in other cases of violent conduct in the area, making people more and more sensitive about Abe's pro-Washington policies.

Abe says he intends to increase the country's defense ties with the U.S. in a bid to keep China in check. However, critics say the policy directly violates Japan's pacifist constitution and would lead to a new confrontation with China in the future.

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