

# “It Ain’t Over ‘Till It’s Over”: Reflections on the Okinawan Anti-Base Resistance

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On 14 December, the Okinawa Defense Bureau officially began reclamation work in preparation for the building of a massive US Marine Corps airbase at Henoko, in Northern Okinawa. I use the word “officially” advisedly: they announced it well in advance, with what could almost be called fanfare. The people opposing this base – the folks carrying out the six-day-a-week sit-in at the construction site and the dock where the ships are being loaded with dirt – call this “construction for show” (*misekake koji*). As they understand it, the Okinawa Defense Bureau is trying to persuade them, and the Prefectural Government, that all is lost, that they should give up their protest and stay home, so that full-fledged construction can finally begin. And so at every turning point in their preparations the Agency stages a performance, a kind of ceremony, the not-so-hidden message of which is “now there is no turning back: resign yourselves to the inevitable and give up”.

Of course, the “performance” is doing serious damage: from the 14<sup>th</sup> real dirt and crushed rock is really being dumped into real seawater of Henoko Bay. If the lawyers and the Prefectural officials are correct, this is also illegal – that is to say, criminal – behavior. But if the Defense Bureau was expecting that 14 December would be the decisive turning point, which would cause the protesters to lapse into spiritless resignation – as they had hoped the November Governor’s election would be – they are in for another major disappointment.

I took the Shimagurumi Kaigi charter bus to Henoko twice just before the big day – Saturday December 8<sup>th</sup> and Wednesday the 12<sup>th</sup> – and again on the day itself, Friday the 14<sup>th</sup>. Here I will report on some of the things that people were talking about, and in what spirit, on the bus and at the gate.

On Saturday the 8<sup>th</sup>, when we arrived at Henoko we found that there were two big busloads, about 100 main island Japanese, visiting from the big All-Japan Prefectural and Municipal Workers’ Union (*JICHIRO*) in addition to the local anti-base activists. It was nice to see so many young people there; most of the regular sit-inners are retired folks. Oshiro Satoru – the number two person at the Peace Center next to Yamashiro Hiroji – was explaining things. The following is the gist of how he and others are defining the situation:

The Japanese Government had hoped to destroy the anti-base movement in the Governor’s election last month: if their candidate had been elected he would have given them all the permits they need to proceed with construction. But they lost by a 70,000-vote margin. Now they are hoping to defeat us in the Prefectural referendum in February. What they are doing now at the construction site is work they think they can do without permits from the Prefecture. Actually there are still many things they need to do that they can’t do without the prefecture’s cooperation. And they are taking a big risk dumping dirt into that area, because the seawall around it is only half



fleet of dump trucks, succeeds in unloading at the site, it's estimated that reclamation would still take five years. But before they begin reclamation on the Oura Bay side they have to build the sea wall there, and before they build the sea wall they have to figure out how to do that. The discovery that much of the sea bottom there is a 40-meter layer of slime has sent them back to the drawing boards. No one can say for sure how long it will take them to firm up the sea bottom (assuming it is possible) because no one knows by what method they will attempt that. One person at the gate said maybe they could do it by drilling "cores" in the sea bottom and filling each with sand. [Where the sea bottom is slime, I assume this would mean lowering huge concrete tubes into the muck, and as they sink, emptying out their interiors with a clamshell until they finally hit something solid, then dumping sand into the empty tubes.] That person estimated it would require 20,000 cores to do the job. Of course, none of this was in the original job description. But the Defense Bureau is not at that stage yet. The fact that they are still boring the sea bottom for soil samples means that, far from having found a solution, they haven't yet got a clear idea of the problem.

Retired Engineer Okuma Masanori explained about the red dirt. Much of what the Defense Bureau is claiming to be crushed rock is in fact red dirt. Crushed rock or even sand will sink right to the bottom; red dirt, however, dissolves, becoming a spongy mess where it finally gets to the bottom and clouding the water where it doesn't. It is very destructive of sea life, and Okinawa has strict laws to prevent it getting into the water. Okuma also reminded us that he is planning to bring in several seismologists to begin testing to determine scientifically the likelihood of there being an active fault beneath the site.

On Saturday the 8<sup>th</sup> no dump truck attempted to enter the construction site.

Wednesday the 12<sup>th</sup>. On the 9:00 AM bus there was the usual mood-making talk (these tour buses have microphones), laughter and singing (people say that uchinaaguchi is an almost-dead language, but it is always the jokes in uchinaaguchi that get the biggest laughs). Higa san, the woman who regularly coordinates the Wednesday buses, after venting her anger at the week's events, announced (as she has done before), "I have quit being Japanese. I resign. I'm Uchinanchu."

Chinen san (who claims to have taken this bus more than 700 times, always sits in the rearmost seat, and is a marvelous raconteur - the bus regulars call his raps "Chinen-bushi") gave a long and impassioned explanation of why we must not/will not be discouraged. This teaches us something important, he said. We put everything we had into getting Tamaki Denny elected, he wins by a big margin, and they just ignore us. But no matter how much they bully us, we will never change. I'm going to keep up the fight until I drop. And I'm in this fight with the intention of winning. We are not going to lose the referendum - we have 70-80% against the base. I think that even if everything went well for them, finishing the base would still take them another 20 years. Anyway, the 14<sup>th</sup> is the day the real fight begins! (For this last he got a big applause.)

At the gate Akamine Seiken (the head of the JCP's Okinawa chapter, and Lower House Diet member elected from Okinawa) reported that the Government's stubbornness and illegal behavior (including using red dirt) was beginning to anger Diet members who had up to now claimed to be neutral.

The big event at the gate that day was the return of Yamashiro Hiroji after spending some time in the hospital (someone told me it was for irregular heartbeats; friends were urging him not to get too excited). Among other things he said he was unhappy that Governor Tamaki was not exploiting all of the Defense Bureau's

illegalities that he could be using. “He needs to listen to Kitaueda (Tsuyoshi) san!” (the other retired engineer participating in the movement). Yamashiro and others talked about the ballooning cost estimates. The original estimate was 231 billion yen; the present estimate is 2.5 trillion yen, (22.12 billion dollars) an increase of ten times (from the audience a woman’s voice: “Twelve times! Twelve times!). And it’s estimated that half of the increase is for security (Hundreds of riot police are being put up not in barracks but in an expensive resort hotel near Henoko).

On Wednesday the 12<sup>th</sup>, the regular three convoys of dump trucks made it into the construction site, being delayed the 20 or 25 minutes it took the riot police to haul the sit-inners away from the gate.

On Friday the 14<sup>th</sup> - the day the Defense Bureau had announced as the day they would take the fateful step of actually beginning to dump landfill into the water - when I arrived at the bus stop in front of the Prefectural Office Building, people were lined up hoping to get on the 9:00 AM bus, which was filling rapidly. In the end 54 people were seated, what looked like a dozen people were left behind, and another dozen or so at the bus stop on the other side of town. (Some of these people probably got to Henoko in their own cars).

On the bus there were a number of people from mainland Japan, and as usual the mike was handed to them first so they could give self-introductions, which are always applauded. When we arrived at the construction gate where the sit-ins take place we found it was locked shut, and about a thousand people were sitting in front of it or standing across the street. It was clear that the Defense Bureau was not going to send any convoys that day. The widow of Onaga Takeshi, the deceased former Governor of Okinawa, was introduced; to my knowledge that was the first time she had participated in the sit-in. As usual, when

the numbers are large and it is mostly the leaders who speak, the content is less interesting than when grass roots folk speak, as on the bus. But with no trucks coming, there was nothing to do but talk and sing. The 1950s/60s Okinawa reversion anthem was sung - more than once as I recall - with the Yamato Japanese singing it in the old way - “Give us back Okinawa” (*Okinawa wo kaese*) - and the Uchinanchu singing it with a slight alteration - “Give Okinawa back to Okinawa” (*Okinawa e kaese*).

After a while we moved from the construction gate to the main gate of Camp Schwab, chanting and singing, and stopped there. With that many people, this meant that the main gate was effectively closed. What happened next was interesting. It's a rule of the movement that we block only construction vehicles, not private cars or even military trucks. Some of the movement leaders wanted to observe that rule, some of the grass roots sit-inners didn't. The leaders slowly and gently urged people back to make a passage for vehicles entering and exiting. A small unit of riot policemen standing inside the base approached, stood on the other side of the yellow border line, and watched carefully to see how this would go. Most of the people moved back, grudgingly, but there were two men who wouldn't. They stood just far enough ahead of the others to prevent a car from getting through. After watching this for some time, two riot police officers crossed the yellow line, walked over to the two resisters, and with talk and little nudges, tried to move them back. It took some time but after a while I guess the two decided they had done enough, and moved back. For better or for worse, a confrontation was avoided. (No, the riot policemen are not always that gentle. But the non-violent behavior of the sit-inners does have an effect on them.)

From there we moved down to the beach by Henoko Harbor, where there was a rally. Not much to report from that: the speakers were



mainly political party representatives and elected officials, who speak mostly boilerplate. But these events are effective as a show of force, as each speaker represents an organization comprised of committed members, a fact from which sit-inners can take courage.

The conclusion I draw from these anecdotes - which I already stated at the beginning of this report - is that the Defense Bureau's strategy of trying to persuade the Okinawans to "resign themselves to the inevitable" is not working. The bullying, rather than leading to spiritless disappointment, is generating spirited anger. They have seen through the Bureau's strategy, and are arming themselves to thwart it. As one person on the bus put it, "The day we resign ourselves, that's the day we lose."

Afterword: On the 15<sup>th</sup>, the day after reclamation began, the neighborhood association of the area where I live had its year-end gathering (*bonenkai*). I've been to a lot of events like this, and as they are attended by people of all sorts of political persuasion, controversial subjects are never mentioned. But this year was an exception. Somehow Henoko got mentioned, and once the ice was broken, the party broke up into three or four knots of people talking about Henoko - most of them angrily. The young fellow sitting across from me told me that he worked on base, but that he voted for Tamaki Denny. Our neighbor who used to be head of the Okinawa Public Safety Commission which oversees the Riot

Police, found herself on the defensive. All of this, in my experience anyway, unprecedented.

To quote a wise American philosopher, "It ain't over 'till it's over."

### Postscript

On 22 December, the morning after this article was sent to APJ/Japan Focus, both of the Okinawan newspapers carried on their front pages a stunning piece of news, The Japanese government, by a decision of the Cabinet, had decided that the money allocated to the Okinawa Defense Bureau for the beginning of seawall construction in 2018 on Oura Bay has to be returned to the treasury, as no such work had been done. Moreover, no money has been allocated for that purpose in the 2019 budget. The government official reporting this was quoted as saying that it is impossible to say now when construction will begin, except that it will be "2020 or after". So that's an *additional* delay of two years at least. At the time of writing this postscript, Dec. 25, this has not been reported in any of the mainstream Japanese media, and nothing at all has been reported in English.

Experienced observers of politics know that if you want to find out what is really going on inside a government, follow the money.

That is, look at the budget.

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