

Freedom of the Press in Japan: PM Staff ‘Restrict’ Reporter, Accuse Her of ‘Spreading Misinformation’ About Environmental Impact of New US Military Base

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A decision by Japanese government officials to “restrict” questions from an unnamed reporter during press conferences has provoked protests by other journalists.

The controversy has re-raised longstanding questions about the environmental impact of a controversial new base for US Marines being constructed in the southwestern prefecture of Okinawa.

At the start of 2019, officials from the Cabinet Office (the government ministry that coordinates the operations of Prime Minister Abe Shinzo) directed the [press club](#) covering the Cabinet Office to “restrict” a certain reporter from asking questions during daily press conferences covering the Japanese prime minister. The Cabinet Office also accused the reporter of “spreading misinformation” about the environmental impact of infill.



The unnamed reporter in question is most likely [Mochizuki Isoko](#), a journalist with the Tokyo Shimbun daily newspaper, who is known for asking difficult questions.

In Japan, news outlets typically get access to politicians and government officials through press clubs, which regulate the activities of members, and can even exclude reporters or news outlets. In turn, sources, such as government departments, can deny or limit press

clubs with access. But it's unusual to ban or restrict the activities of journalists from media outlets like [Tokyo Shimbun](#), a prominent daily known for its watchdog approach to government activities.

Reporter questioned environmental effects of construction for US Marine base

Mochizuki apparently angered the Cabinet Office during a news conference on December 26, when she asked about the risks of environmental contamination at a [controversial construction site in Okinawa](#).

In order to build a [long-planned](#) base for US Marines permanently stationed in Okinawa, sand and rock infill is being used to build an artificial island in a bay off of Henoko, a township about 65 km north of Naha, Okinawa.

The construction project is destroying and literally paving over existing tropical coral habitat in the bay. It has been reported that the construction project is using inexpensive red soil infill, instead of the gravel that was budgeted in the project and paid for by the government, in an effort to cut corners. There are also suspicions that construction contractors including [Ryuku Cement](#) are pocketing the difference.

The use of red soil as infill for marine construction projects is specifically [prohibited](#) by Okinawan law, even though the Henoko project has the direct support of the central government in Tokyo. The iron-rich red soil contaminates the surrounding seawater and is deadly to native corals. Local activists such as the [Osprey Fuan Club](#) say the infill also will likely contaminate nearby surviving coral colonies.

📷 pic.twitter.com/VddTBdh8e5

— 島田 穂花 (@toshipiko1) [December 21, 2018](#)

“Outrageous.”

The preservation of coral habitat displaced or destroyed by the Henoko project has been a contentious and potentially embarrassing issue for the government for the past few months, with Prime Minister Abe even [claiming](#) corals would somehow be moved away from the infill site to be transplanted in a new location.

Reporter accused of asking questions that would ‘spread misinformation’

When Mochizuki asked a series of pointed questions about the possible harms of the project at a December 26 press conference, it struck a nerve with media relations staff at the Cabinet Office.

Shortly thereafter, [in their letter to the press club](#), the Cabinet Office strongly denied that red soil was being used as infill, and then also asserted that if it was used, its presence did not contravene Okinawan prefectural laws.

The Cabinet Office did not name Mochizuki, but instead [stated](#) that a “certain reporter” (島田 穂花), had asked “inappropriate questions” (“不適切な質問”) that would “spread misinformation” to both members of the press club and to the general public (“一般市民”).

“In regards to Mochizuki Isako from Tokyo Shimbun, here’s an article published in December 2018. In terms of how (the Chief Cabinet Secretary and the Communications Director) behave, here’s a look at how much time is spent answering her questions.

#towards a country where we can freely ask questions”

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Featured image: Government infill project at Henoko Bay in Okinawa. Questions about the use of environmentally harmful red soil in the project led to demands that a journalist be shut out of press conferences. Image widely shared on social media.

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