

# Japanese Island Set for Mass Rally Against US Bases

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Region: [Asia](#)

Global Research, April 26, 2010

[AFP](#) 25 April 2010

YOMITAN, Japan - Up to 100,000 demonstrators on the Japanese island of Okinawa are set to protest against a US airbase Sunday in a row that is dominating national politics and souring ties with Washington.

The huge rally near Kadena Air Base, the largest US military facility in the Asia-Pacific region, is expected to include Okinawa governor Hirokazu Nakaima and more than 30 town mayors.

Many on the subtropical island chafe at the heavy American military presence, a legacy of Japan's World War II defeat to the United States, complaining of noise, pollution and frictions with US soldiers.

The issue threatens the political future of centre-left Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama, who has been pressured by both Washington and his left-leaning political allies to find a solution to the dispute.

The row centres on the unpopular US Marine Corps Air Station Futenma, which under a 2006 pact with Washington was to be moved from the crowded city of Ginowan to the quieter coastal Henoko area of Okinawa.

Hatoyama, after taking power in September in a landslide election, said the base may be moved off the island instead. But a search for alternative locations has met with more local protests.

"We can never accept the US base. If it happens, the whole of our fishery will be damaged," Hiroyuki Akamine, president of the fishermen's cooperative in one of the reported alternative locations, told AFP ahead of the rally.

The prime minister has set himself a deadline of late May to resolve the issue, while the United States maintains it wants Tokyo to stick with the original plan.

On Friday, under questioning from a conservative lawmaker, Hatoyama staked his job on resolving the issue by the end of next month.

Ahead of crucial upper house elections due in July, Hatoyama has seen his approval ratings dive as criticism has grown of his dithering on the issue.

On the eve of the protest, the Washington Post said the Japanese government had indicated it would broadly accept the 2006 pact.

Japanese Foreign Minister Katsuya Okada had presented an offer to US Ambassador John Roos on Friday, the US newspaper said, quoting unnamed sources.

Okada had suggested some changes, including altering the design of a new runway and moving parts of the Marine Corps facility to an island about 100 miles (160 miles) from Okinawa, it said.

But the government denied the report on Saturday and Hatoyama said he rejected the original 2006 plan to build the replacement US airbase in Henoko.

“It must never happen that we accept the existing plan,” Hatoyama told reporters Saturday.

Hiroshi Ashitomi, 64, who has led the campaign against the relocation in Henoko, said: “Building a new military base here in this beautiful sea is never acceptable.”

“Okinawan people won’t accept the government’s flip-flop that the relocation site is now back again to Henoko, after they found no other alternatives,” he said in front of the emerald-green waters of Henoko.

The United States set up the Futenma airbase in 1945 as it took the island in one of World War II’s bloodiest battles.

It did not return Okinawa to Japan until 1972 and still operates more than 30 military facilities on the island, strategically located near China, Taiwan and the Korean peninsula.

Under the 2006 agreement, Futenma facilities would be shifted to reclaimed land around Camp Schwab in Henoko and about 8,000 Marines would move to the US territory of Guam.

Japan, which committed to pacifism in its post-WWII constitution, relies for its security on its treaty partner the United States, which stations some 47,000 troops in the country, more than half of them on Okinawa.

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