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Okinawa: The Pentagon's Toxic Junk Heap of the Pacific

By Global Research News
Global Research, November 26, 2013
Theme: Environment, Militarization and WMD

by Jon Mitchell

In June 2013, construction workers unearthed more than 20 rusty barrels from beneath a soccer pitch in Okinawa City. The land had once been part of Kadena Air Base – the Pentagon's largest installation in the Pacific region – but was returned to civilian usage in 1987. Tests revealed that the barrels contained two ingredients of military defoliants used in the Vietnam War – the herbicide 2,4,5-T and 2,3,7,8-TCDD dioxin. Levels of the highly toxic TCDD in nearby water measured 280 times safe limits.[1]

The Pentagon has repeatedly denied the storage of defoliants – including Agent Orange – on Okinawa.[2] Following the discovery, it distanced itself from the barrels; a spokesperson stated it was investigating if they had been buried after the land's return in 1987[3] and a U.S. government-sponsored scientist suggested they may merely have contained kitchen or medical waste.[4] However, the conclusions of the Japanese and international scientific community were unequivocal: Not only did the barrels disprove Pentagon denials of the presence of military defoliants in Japan, the polluted land posed a threat to the health of local residents and required immediate remediation.[5]

The Pentagon is the largest polluter on the planet.[6]

Producing more toxic waste than the U.S.A.'s top three chemical manufacturers combined, in 2008 25,000 of its properties within the U.S. were found to be contaminated. More than 100 of thee were classified by the Environmental Protection Agency as Superfund sites which necessitated urgent clean-up.[7]

Although Okinawa Island hosts more than 30 U.S. bases – taking up 20% of its land – there has never been a concerted attempt to investigate levels of contamination within them. Unlike other nations with U.S. bases such as South Korea and Germany, the Japanese government has no effective powers to conduct environmental checks, nor does the Pentagon have a duty to disclose to the public any contamination that it knows to exist.[8] To date, most incidents of pollution have only become known when individual service members divulge details to the media or, as in the case of the barrels uncovered in Okinawa City, the Japanese authorities conduct tests following the return of military land.

Despite their limited scope, such disclosures offer a disturbing window into the contamination of Okinawa. Over the past seven decades, the island's sea, land and air have

been contaminated with toxins including arsenic, depleted uranium, nerve gas and carcinogenic hexavalent chromium. These substances have poisoned Okinawan civilians and U.S. troops alike – and it is highly probable that they are damaging the health of those living on the island today. But, regardless of these risks, the Pentagon continues to do everything it can to evade responsibility for the damage its bases cause.

The history of U.S. pollution on Okinawa is almost as long as its ongoing military presence. Following the end of World War Two, Okinawa earned the nickname the "Junk Heap of the Pacific" due to the large volume of surplus supplies abandoned there.[9] During this period, one of the first known instances of contamination occurred when eight residents of Iheya Village were killed by arsenic poisoning from a nearby U.S. compound in 1947.[10]

The 1952 Treaty of San Francisco granted the Pentagon full control of Okinawa and, as the military seized large tracts of civilian land to convert into bases, the dangers of pollution grew. Fuel leaks saturated the ground, industrial-grade detergents flowed from runways into nearby streams and solvents were flushed away without regard to where they ended up.

Such lax environmental controls were common on U.S. military bases all over the world at this time, but Okinawa's problems were exacerbated by the geo-political gray zone in which it existed. Throughout the 1945 – 1972 U.S. occupation, the island was not protected by American law or the Japanese constitution, so the Pentagon stored large stockpiles of chemical and atomic weapons there – and nuclear-powered submarines made regular pit-stops to Okinawa.

In September 1968, Japanese newspapers reported that radioactive cobalt-60 had been detected in Naha Port – believed by scientists to have emanated from visiting U.S. subs. Three Okinawan divers reported being sickened by their exposure to the substance which accumulated in mud at the bottom of the harbour.[11]

The next year, the Wall Street Journal broke the news of a leak of nerve gas at Chibana Ammunition Depot, near Kadena Air Base, that hospitalized more than 20 U.S. service members. Precise details of the subsequent mop-up operation remained hidden until July this year when U.S. veterans stationed on the island at the time described how tons of the chemical munitions had been dumped off Okinawa's coast.[12] Experts estimate that the metal containers holding these poisons corrode after fifty years, threatening the health of fishing crews and coastal communities today.

During the Vietnam War, Okinawa served as the Pentagon's primary staging post for the conflict. Led by the U.S. Army's 2nd Logistics Division, the military channeled the majority of its supplies – including ammunition, coffins and, now it seems, Agent Orange – via the island's ports. This transportation was a two-way street; surplus and damaged materiel was also returned from the war zone to Okinawa for re-processing.

Ships offload supplies in 1969 during the Vietnam War at Naha Military Port. Courtesy of Michael Jones.

In 1969, U.S. Army Chemical Corps Second Lieutenant Lindsay Pe1terson was the officer in charge of these retrograde supplies at Hamby Outside Storage Area, central Okinawa. In a

recent interview, he recalled how damaged barrels of Agent Orange were among chemicals shipped to the island. “Agent Orange was processed through the port at Naha and trucked to the Hamby Open Storage Area. When I arrived, there were around 10,000 barrels. Most of them were leaking so we had to empty them into new 55 gallon (208 litre) drums.”[13]

Peterson recalls how the re-drumming process saturated his crew with defoliants. He is among hundreds of seriously ill U.S. veterans who believe their sicknesses were caused by exposure to dioxin-tainted defoliants while serving on Okinawa. Although the U.S. government has refused to help the majority of these veterans, in 2008 it awarded compensation to a former marine warehouseman suffering from Hodgkin’s lymphoma and type 2 diabetes mellitus sparked by handling Agent Orange-contaminated supplies brought back to Okinawa from the Vietnam War in the early 1970s.[14]

Other U.S. veterans have alleged that surplus stocks of Agent Orange were buried during the 1960s and ‘70s on Okinawan installations including Hamby Air Base,

Barrels of unidentified chemicals lie strewn across land in the Northern Training Area, 1972. Courtesy of Robin Poe.

MCAS Futenma and Kadena Air Base.[15]With the benefit of hindsight such practices seem unfathomable but, at the time, the burial of Agent Orange was standard military operating procedure. For example, a U.S. Army handbook from 1971 titled “Tactical Employment of Herbicides” states:

Used containers and surplus quantities of ORANGE should be buried in deep pits at locations where there will be the least possibility of agent leaching into water supplies or cultivated crop areas.

In addition to Okinawa, burials of surplus military herbicides also took place on Guam – where, despite allegations from U.S. service members, the Pentagon continues to deny the presence of such substances.[16]

Other U.S. veterans and Okinawa civilians recall how surplus stocks of Agent Orange were sold on the black market to local farmers who valued its potent weed-killing power. The risks of the unregulated sale of hazardous substances to those lacking the necessary safety training became clear in 1971 when large volumes of pentachlorophenol herbicides – obtained from the U.S. military by a civilian company – were dumped in the Haebaru and Gushikami districts of southern Okinawa. The chemicals leaked into the Kokuba River and the water supply to 30,000 people had to be halted; children attending local schools suffered from abdominal pains and nausea.[17]

U.S. government correspondence reveals the reaction of the authorities to such pollution during this period. In August 1975, following a leak of detergents containing poisonous hexavalent chromium at Machinato Service Area, the U.S. consulate in Naha sent a series of updates to the State Department in Washington. Dismissing the spill as a “flap”, it concluded “the newspapers and the leftists will certainly make good use of this issue against us.”[18]

In September 1974, the U.S. consulate had displayed a similar tone when Okinawa Governor Yara Chobyo voiced fears to the U.S. military that its aging oil pipelines might leak. In a cable, the U.S. consulate in Naha brushed off the governor's concerns, noting the "pipeline has now been added to leftist catalogue of evils of U.S. base system."[19] A little over a year later – in January 1976 – Yara's concerns were proven justified when one of the pipelines spilled 14,000 gallons (53,000 litres) of diesel into a local river.

In the 1970s, the Pentagon showed more concern over potential PR damage than the risk to human health; today its stance towards the discovery of the dioxin-contaminated barrels in Okinawa City seems identical. Its denials attempt to protect its image of a good neighbour – but its failure to take action potentially sacrifices the health of local Okinawans, its own service members and their dependants. Although the Okinawa City dioxin site is located adjacent to two Department of Defense schools, it appears that the parents and teachers there have not been informed.


Okinawa officials visit the dumpsite of U.S. surpluspentachlorophenol herbicides in southern Okinawa, 1971. Used with permission of Okinawa Prefectural Archives.

During the 1970s, such neglect could have been blamed on a lack of environmental awareness. However, today in 2013, such a posture is criminal – reminiscent of the contamination of Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, where tens of thousands of troops and family members were exposed to toxins including pesticides, benzene and industrial solvents between 1953 and 1987.

The Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) – the foundation, unchanged since 1960, that spells out the rights and role of the U.S. military in Japan – encourages the Pentagon's cavalier approach to pollution. Article IV of SOFA absolves the U.S. of all financial responsibility for cleaning up land it has contaminated and does not allow the Japanese authorities to conduct spot-checks on U.S. military bases.

This clause places all responsibility for the remediation of returned military land on the shoulders of the Japanese government. However reprehensible that the polluter evades responsibility, the problem is magnified by the fact that Tokyo tries to evade its responsibility under the SOFA. In 2002, for example, almost 200 barrels of unidentified tar-like substances were discovered on former military land in Chatan. The U.S. Department of Defense initially denied that the barrels had belonged to them so the Japanese government refused to cover the 20 million yen (approximately $200,000) that Chatan City had paid to clean up the area. Even after the Pentagon finally admitted the barrels had been theirs, Tokyo attempted to shirk its responsibility to compensate the city for the costs it had incurred. Eventually, the Japanese government paid back the money for the cleanup – labeling i a "consolatory payment".[20]

A 1973 Japan-U.S. Joint Committee agreement exists which states that local authorities "may request the local base commander to make an [environmental] investigation, the results of which should be made known . . . as promptly as possible." However such requests are often rejected. Following allegations of the presence of Agent Orange on Camp Schwab, Nago City, during the Vietnam War, city councilors demanded an investigation –

but this was denied.[21]

Given these constraints on access to U.S. installations, Japanese scientists have been forced to improvise. Recently, experts from Ehime and Meio Universities conducted tests on seven mongooses whose habitat included U.S. bases. Announced in August, the results showed the animals were contaminated with high levels of polychlorinated biphenyls (PCB) – raising worries that humans living in the same areas may be poisoned, too.[22]

Mongooses aside, the only alternative has been to conduct tests on military land following its return to civilian control. As in the case of Okinawa City, such checks often reveal dangerous levels of contamination. In Yomitan Village, for example, levels of arsenic 120 times over the legal limit were found on former U.S.-controlled land in 2008.[23] Then in July this year, asbestos was discovered at a site that used to be a part of Camp Courtney. In this case, the U.S. authorities appear to have misled the civilian construction company tasked with the cleanup – leading to the suspected exposure of Okinawan workers. [24]

But even after pollution has been detected, the new problem arises of how to deal with it. In September, it was revealed that 322 tons of PCB-laden slurry from former U.S. military land in Okinawa was to be shipped for disposal to Iwaki City, Fukushima Prefecture – a municipality located 50km from the stricken nuclear power station. Critics of the plan accused the Japanese authorities of exploiting the prefecture's need for money and worsening its already dire pollution problems.[25]

In the coming years, it is likely such troubles will become more pressing. In October, Japan's Minister of Defense, Itsunori Onodera, reiterated plans to concentrate the U.S. military presence in the northern half of Okinawa Island – a move which will entail the closure of several installations including Machinato Service Area, one of the main bases where defoliants were allegedly stored, and – ultimately – MCAS Futenma. Experts have estimated the cost of the cleanup of MCAS Futenma at $600 million – but that was before the cost of Agent Orange remediation had been figured into calculations.

Okinawa residents have long protested, calling for a future with fewer bases. But even after their wish becomes a reality, it seems the land they've fought so hard to retrieve will be uninhabitable for years – if not decades – to come.

This article is an expanded version of one that first appeared in The Japan Times November 12, 2013. The research within it formed the basis of a presentation Mitchell gave to lawmakers, university professors and members of the public at Okinawa Prefectural Assembly on November 11, 2013.

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Notes

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