**Peaceful Assemblies in Okinawa**

Please see the following video;

“We, the people struggling by the sit-in protest on the field, have built the Okinawan will.”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YUSs6AAQMnc> (English)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uxkGNjoaH3k> (Chinese)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5MmHA0qF-PE&t=4s>(German)

***Meaning of peaceful assemblies in islands like Okinawa***

Okinawa, the islands located in the southernmost part of Japan, has a history of being colonized, invaded etc., and has consistently fought against the power in a nonviolent way. Even at present, the islands have been gradually militarized, in spite of the islanders’ strong will for peace. In such areas, peaceful assemblies play a big role, closely linked to important massive anti-military/anti-war movement. They lead to election campaigns, referendums, appeals to the central/local governments, which are the basis for democracy.

The right of peaceful assemblies is indispensable to the islanders to protect their human rights, because they tend to be marginalized and their rights can be easily violated by police, military force, corporations or other countries etc.

***Communication in peaceful assemblies***

A peaceful assembly is a place where citizens can communicate with each other, presenting ideas or sharing troubles/sufferings with others. Participants with different opinions can have a consensus on their same problem so they develop a larger movement in a temporal way.

In Henoko, located in the northern part of Okinawa, where a protest movement is regularly held, people in various positions, with a range of age etc., come from other regions and exchange ideas or take advice to each other on various issues. Those who have same problems, such as militarization, discrimination, environmental destruction etc., meet there so that they can communicate with each other in an effective way, which is, in many cases, maintained after a relevant assembly. In this era when communication technology has been developed, citizens can easily know how others fight against the force, observe the situation in other countries, get information on how to keep social movement and help each other.

For another important role of peaceful assemblies, young people will be able to know about how old people have fought against the power to protect their lives/families and appeal to the central/local governments, according to the Constitution of Japan, local/international laws, in a non-violent way for democracy. For referendums, the Prefectural Referendum, held in 2019, on landfill work at Henoko for a military base construction, inspired the youth; A young citizen group requested a referendum to the city council against construction of a missile base by the Self-Defense Forces of Japan (SDFJ) in Ishigaki Island while school children performed Under-17 Prefectural Referendum in a form of sticker voting on landfill at Henoko in Naha City.

***Creative non-violent actions in Okinawa***

Okinawans traditionally love music and have suffered through difficult circumstances, such as the cruel Battle of Okinawa, by comforting or inspiring themselves with music. They used a can to make a musical tool, Sanshin. Their tradition has still kept their identity and confidence in culture which they belong to. For example, in a peaceful assembly, participants express their feeling by singing, dancing etc. whether they are happy or depressed.

They create a variety of expressive non-violent protest actions. For example, there are some ways to block vehicles for illegal construction they oppose to. These include sit-in, standing, slow walking (so-called cow-like walking), dancing, delaying trucks by driving cars (they call it with humor “Go Go Drive”) etc. They always wave to other drivers, holding a placard, to get publicity for their protest movement. In Miyako Island, one of the islands where a movement against an ammunition depot for SDFJ has occurred, the protestors show a local dance in front of a row of trucks to delay their work. Singing and dancing also attracts other residents who want to make an appeal but timid to join a radical movement.

In addition, remarkably, a peaceful assembly may be an occasion for protestors to communicate with police officers etc. to a small degree, keeping a human relationship with them.

***Police brutality***

In Okinawa, violence of riot police is more serious than any other regions in Japan, particularly when police officers are dispatched from the prefectures other than Okinawa. One of the dispatched officers said to a novelist who was born in Okinawa, “You, savage!”, revealing that no real education of human rights, including the principle of non-discrimination, is performed for law enforcement officers in Japan.

And now Illegal construction by the government of Japan (for a new U.S. military base) is protected by the local police under the command of the Okinawa Defense Bureau. Police seemingly protect the protestors from vehicles entering to the construction site, but they push protestors in favor of coming trucks, while drivers often violate the traffic law or drive in a dangerous way, but the police never give a warning to any of them.

In Henoko, sit-in people are removed by riot police when trucks come to the construction site. Though the police get to treat protestors more carefully these days than before, they don’t seem to know about their role for peaceful assemblies to respect and protect participants. They say they should do each of their own work, monitoring protestors’ compliance with the traffic law etc., and they ignore other illegal actions even though they witness it in front of them. For example, police do nothing about delivery of red soil to the construction site, which flows into the sea and damages the growth of coral reefs, accelerating the global warming. Okinawa Prefecture bans runoff of red soil, which officers should naturally know. However, they are trained to do only what they are ordered, and they ignore obvious violation, such as runoff of red soil, resulting in destruction of the sea.

Police officers often take photos near protestors so the protestors’ right to privacy may be easily violated. They say they are doing their job, not infringing the right to privacy, but the protestors have no ways to confirm what they say.

Police once arrested one of the protest leaders and detained him for a long time, without providing medical care though he has a severe disease. He could not meet his family members, even his wife for a while, which is quite disproportionate to what he did. He cut the razor wire to protect humans/animals in the woods. It was a nonviolent and symbolic expression against occupation but was determined by the court as a criminal damage.

An elderly woman, a survivor from the Battle of Okinawa, was once summoned to the police station, and right-wing persons were driving around the station with a noisy sound, which sounded like siren blown during the war. This reminded the woman of her cruel war experience, so she disturbed her health. At that time, police did not protect her by stopping the car immediately.

In Henoko, containment is performed by riot police after removal of protestors while vehicles for construction may easily enter to the U.S. military base. The protestors cannot move freely even though they observe the traffic law. And they are removed by riot police, with their limbs grabbed, if they refuse to move.

On the sea, canoe members, who are heading to the landfill area for protest, are always detained by the coast guard. A female movie director who makes documentaries to spread real situation in Okinawa, was once strangled violently by the coast guard. You can see the situation via video.

To disseminate the international standards at a local level, the local government should set up an independent monitoring group that constitutes lawyers etc. who are familiar with international and national human rights laws. If possible, a system for dealing immediately with violation of local, national and international laws, in particular, on environment, should be established.

***Freedom of information is critical to peaceful assemblies***

Journalists etc. who convey the situation around the peaceful assemblies should be protected.

The government of Japan enforced regulations of drones, but critical information for residents, such as the one on environmental destruction, should be provided if needed.

***Peaceful assemblies are essential to Okinawans***

Para 114 is very important for peaceful assemblies in Okinawa. Okinawans have made a protest for a long time against militarization. Nearly 75% of the U.S. military bases in Japan are concentrated in Okinawa. This means that the islands where the devastating battle occurred and killed many unarmed citizens will be targeted again.

Besides, environmental destruction caused by military bases is closely related to deterioration of the local lives. More to the point, the environment includes not only the nature but also Okinawans’ anchorage, such as an area where their ancestors were buried, a sanctuary called “Utaki” etc., and water contamination means destruction of precious springs they have treasured for a long time, and groundwater is vital to the islanders.

Increased military bases in Okinawa may drive out indigenous people from their islands and destroy their history, culture etc.

Therefore, anti-military base/anti-war movement is essential to Okinawans.

Protestors, in particular, survivors of the Battle of Okinawa, should be protected and listened to, and importance of peaceful assemblies should be understood by residents including young people. So, for example, when an old protestor makes a short speech in front of a truck, he should be waited for a few minutes with respect. Removing him immediately in a violent way, giving priority to trucks for illegal construction, is out of the question.