

Voices of Okinawa Women

Sexual Violence by U.S. Military Personnel Unpunished, Human Rights of Women and the People Unprotected



New Japan Women's Association
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New Japan Women's Association (Shinfujin/NJWA) is a women's NGO in special consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council. Since its founding in 1962, the association has been working for a world free of nuclear weapons, free of war and free of military bases. It also promotes gender equality, rights of women and children, and solidarity of women around the world for peace.

Heavy U.S. Military Presence in Okinawa

During its 27-year occupation of Okinawa since the end of World War II in 1945, the U.S. military forcibly took the local people's lands to expand its bases in violation of international law. As occupation forces, the U.S. military behaved outrageously, trampling on the rights of Okinawan people. They were never brought to justice for any crimes they committed, even when a soldier fatally shot a farmer mistaking him for an animal, or raped and killed a little girl.

People's growing anger led to the "miraculous" reversion of Okinawa to Japan in 1972, but the U.S. military presence remained and 70% of all U.S. bases in Japan are concentrated in Okinawa. U.S. forces enjoy their privileges granted under the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA), and there has been no end to human rights violation cases and accidents involving U.S. military personnel. The chronology of sexual crimes by U.S. service members compiled by a women's organization in Okinawa found that more than 948 women and girls have fallen victim to such crimes.

Sexual Crimes Kept Hidden

In December 2023, a U.S. soldier based in Okinawa sexually assaulted an underage girl, but the case had been concealed until June 2024, when the local media reported it. While having the investigative authority in this case, the Japanese government did not exercise it and instead handed it over to the U.S. military. The act was unfit for a sovereign nation.

In 1995, three U.S. Marines raped a 12-year-old school girl, sparking massive protests throughout Okinawa, leading to a rally where 85,000 people gathered. The anger was so strong that it "shook the island." In 1997, the governments of Japan and the U.S. agreed on the notification procedures for incidents and accidents involving U.S. forces in Japan, but this information sharing mechanism did not work this time. It was also revealed that there were four more hidden cases of sexual abuse not only in Okinawa but also in other places in Japan. Many civic groups raised strong voices against the incidents and the concealment. The Okinawa Prefectural Assembly unanimously adopted a statement of protest and a resolution demanding an official apology and drastic revision of SOFA. Local assemblies also lodged protests and adopted statement to the same effect.

During the period the Japanese government withheld information on those cases, a series of important events took place, such as the execution by proxy for Henoko base construction (December 2023), Japan-U.S. Summit Meeting (April 2024), visit of U.S. Ambassador to Japan Rahm Emanuel to Okinawa (May), and the Okinawa Prefectural Assembly Election as well as the Okinawa



NJWA Okinawa Chapter members joined 85,000 in the outdoor rally to protest the rape of a girl, demanding the SOFA revision - Ginowan City, Okinawa Pref., October 21, 1995

Memorial Day (June). We must note that the national government hid the information to avoid the cases becoming political issues. We feel strong resentment over the Japanese government's attitude to place the Japan-U.S. military alliance over its responsibility to protect lives and human rights of the Okinawan people.

Measures to Protect People from Human Rights Violation Needed

NJWA's Okinawa Chapter delegates came to Tokyo on July 12 to visit the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to protest face to face and to request the following:

- Apologize the victims, protect their privacy, and provide mental and emotional care,
- Punish the perpetrators with severity,
- Explain the reason why the national government failed to inform the Okinawa prefectural government of the case in question,
- Request the U.S. Military immediate extradition of suspects in cases of heinous crimes including sexual assault,
- Swiftly and drastically revise the Japan-U.S. Status of Forces Agreement.

Deputy Director-General of North American Affairs Bureau, who received the Okinawa Chapter delegates, only said that they would not demand an apology from the U.S. because the suspect was on trial and should be considered as "innocent until proven guilty." He made no mention to the requests.

Every time an incident or accident involving U.S. military personnel occurs, the Japanese government says that it requests the U.S. side to tighten discipline and prevent reoccurrence, but the number of crimes has been on the rise for the past 10 years. According to the National Police Agency, there were 118 criminal cases involving U.S. military personnel in Japan in 2023, and 72 of them were reported in Okinawa, with both numbers reaching record high.



"No! Sexual Violence", "No! Cover-up"
 NJWA members took to the streets in protest - Naha City, Okinawa Pref., June 28 2024
 NJWA members organized protest actions throughout the country in solidarity with Okinawa

Under the SOFA, Japanese laws do not apply in principle to U.S. troops in Japan, allowing crimes, environmental contamination and human rights violation arising from the U.S. military presence to go unchallenged. Other U.S. allies, however, have agreements with the U.S. military that their national laws

apply to the U.S. stationing forces. Okinawa Prefecture Governor TAMAKI Denny criticized the national government that it seems to have abandoned the sovereignty.



NJWA's weekly paper Shinfujin Shimbum of July 27 2024 featuring the issue of sexual violence by US military and its concealment, along with the report of Okinawa Chapter delegates' visit to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Now that the Japanese government pushes for militarization of Southwest islands and reinforcement of bases using the Taiwan contingency and Chinese threat as a pretext, we fear this would result in the further increase in sexual crimes by U.S. military personnel. The government should recognize sexual violence as a human rights issue and take effective measures to protect women and girls. On the occasion that the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women considers Japan's 9th Periodic Report, we call on the Japanese government to:

Strictly follow the reporting procedures, and take actions to drastically revise the Japan-U.S. Status Forces Agreement, reduce and close U.S. military bases, and to abrogate the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty.