



WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 8, 2004

Over 400 U.S. groups against building new U.S. base in Okinawa

More than 400 U.S. environmental groups have urged Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi and U.S. President George W. Bush to cancel a plan to build a military-civilian airport in Okinawa to relocate the U.S. Marines' Futenma Air Station. The request was made in a joint letter dated Tuesday and addressed to Koizumi and Bush, according to Peter Galvin, the conservation director of the Center for Biological Diversity, a nongovernmental organization which has organized the groups.

The Japanese government plans to construct the new airport off Nago's Henoko district to replace the heliport functions of the Futenma base in Ginowan.

The Center for Biological Diversity has filed a lawsuit against the plan in the United States.

The letter said the plan "will destroy one of the last healthy reefs in Okinawa, pushing many magnificent species closer to extinction."

"By canceling the plan to construct the air base near Henoko, you can help protect a globally important ocean ecosystem and some of the best remaining habitat for Okinawa dugong."

Dugongs are rare sea mammals distantly related to elephants. They inhabit warm, shallow waters throughout the Indo-Pacific region and Okinawa is their northernmost home.

The Japanese Defense Facilities Administration Agency is prepared to launch a drilling survey as early as this week in the waters planned for the air base, following the crash in August of a U.S.

Marine helicopter from the Futenma Air Station, which is located in a residential area.

Galvin said expediting the relocation of the air station in view of the accident represents a "double insult" to the Okinawa people.

The accident prompted 10 conservative Ginowan city assembly members to ask the Naha office of the agency and Okinawa Gov. Keiichi Inamine on Wednesday to realize the return of the land on which the Futenma base sits to Ginowan.

Although tolerant of the planned relocation of the base to the waters near Nago's Henoko district, they called for reconsidering the present plan envisaging a 2,000-meter runway for military and civilian use.

They said if the substitute base is not built in seven years, the land the Futenma base occupies should be returned to the city unconditionally.