

Over 400 US groups against building new airport in Japan's Okinawa

Text of report in English by Japanese news agency Kyodo Naha, Japan, 8 September: More than 400 US environmental groups have urged Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi and US President George W. Bush to cancel a plan to build a military-civilian airport in Okinawa to relocate the US Marines' Futenma Air Station.

The request was made in a joint letter dated Tuesday [7 September] and addressed to Koizumi and Bush, according to Peter Galvin, the conservation director of the Centre for Biological Diversity, a non-governmental organization which has organized the groups.

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

The Centre 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 cancelling 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 Defence 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 US 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 Governor 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.