

Okinawan state of mind

By KIROKU HANAI

"An island of deep-seated resentment" — that was the first impression I had of Okinawa Prefecture on my visit there in late July. Everywhere in the island prefecture, I found monuments to the war dead. They number 419.

The largest of the monuments is "*Heiwa no Ishiji*" (The Cornerstone of Peace) in the city of Itoman. It was erected by the Okinawa prefectural government to remember some 240,000 people who died in the Battle of Okinawa regardless of their nationalities.

Elderly residents showed me a number of caves that served as shelters during the battle and told me about their tragic wartime experiences. I felt as if the souls of people who died with feelings of deep-seated resentment were still there. After the war ended, survivors of the fierce Battle of Okinawa, in which one of every four islanders died, were unable to enjoy peace. Many had their properties seized — almost at bayonet point, according to some islanders — and bulldozed to build U.S. military installations.

Okinawa Prefecture accounts for only 0.6 percent of the nation's land area, yet 75 percent of U.S. military installations in Japan are concentrated in the prefecture.

It has been 62 years since the Battle of Okinawa ended, and 35 years since Okinawa reverted to Japanese rule from U.S. control. Nevertheless, Etsuko Jahana, director of the antiwar peace museum in the village of Ie, said she felt as if the war had never ended in Okinawa. With U.S. military bases occupying so much of Okinawa, a sense of deep-seated resentment prevails.

I was also impressed with Okinawans' passionate support for Japan's pacifist Constitution. In front of the entrance to an underground cave, in which the former Okinawa Army Hospital was located, I found a stone monument on which the Constitution's war-renouncing Article 9 was engraved.

The message on the monument said it was erected last May by volunteer residents. I was moved by the residents' resolve to erect the monument amid growing national debate on whether to revise the Constitution.

In the village of Yomitan, there was also a signboard displaying Article 9 in large letters in front of a library. I understood the feelings of those Okinawans who had longed for reversion to Japan and sought protection under the pacifist Constitution.

However, Okinawans' hope of enjoying peace under the Constitution appears illusory. In a prefectural referendum held in September 1996, 89 percent of the voters supported a proposal to seek a reduction of the U.S. military presence and a review of the Japan-U.S. Status of Forces Agreement. Even so, there has been little progress in reducing U.S. military bases and practically no review of SOFA.

Okinawa is the only Japanese region that experienced a brutal Japan-U.S. ground battle and public "allergy" to the Imperial Japanese Army — that is, resentment against it — is much stronger in Okinawa than elsewhere in Japan.

Nevertheless, education ministry censors of high school history textbooks scheduled for use beginning next year ordered revisions in all passages stating that mass suicides of Okinawan local residents during the Battle of Okinawa were ordered by the Japanese military. The revisions, the first of their kind ever ordered by the ministry, made many Okinawans very angry.

To obtain ministry approval, textbook publishers changed the passages, with the revised versions saying ambiguously that some residents were "forced" to commit mass suicides.

In the mass suicides, relatives killed one another or parents killed their children before killing themselves as they were cornered by the horrors of war. The mass suicides are the worst tragedy of the Battle of Okinawa, and Okinawans have tended to treat the topic as taboo. All Okinawans agree that people would have never killed their loved ones if it had not been for the Japanese military's involvement (orders, pressure, inducement, indoctrination, etc.)

Since March, when the results of the textbook screenings were known, there have been growing demands in the

prefecture to have the screening results rescinded. The prefectural assembly twice adopted a written opinion demanding the withdrawal of the screening results. All municipalities in Okinawa Prefecture have taken similar action.

On Sept. 29, some 50,000 Okinawans are expected to hold a rally to demand the nullification of the screening results. Gov. Hirokazu Nakaima, who was reportedly reluctant to attend the gathering, changed his mind and decided to take part. Most of the mayors of the 41 municipalities in Okinawa Prefecture decided to attend the rally. Their attendance will turn it into a prefecture-wide protest against the education ministry.

The textbook issue reinvigorated the opposition camp, which had been discouraged by losses they suffered to the conservative forces in the 2006 gubernatorial election and the Upper House by-election this spring.

In the July 29 Upper House election, Keiko Itokazu, supported by five opposition parties including the Social Democratic Party and the Okinawa Social Mass Party, won a crushing victory over the Liberal Democratic Party candidate by a margin of over 100,000 votes in the Okinawa electoral district.

In the proportional representation district, SDP candidate Tokushin Yamauchi won. People of the opposition camp everywhere in Okinawa were encouraged by their candidates' big victories and renewed their determination to push the anti-U.S.-base campaign.

Government officials have said the election results will not affect their policies toward Okinawa since the law for promoting U.S. military realignment in Japan was enacted last May.

Gov. Nakaima, however, has been in a delicate state of confrontation with the government, demanding that the substitute facility to be built in Nago for the U.S. Marine Corps' Futenma Air Station be moved further offshore from the location envisaged in the government plan, and that the Futenma facility be closed within three years.

Given the growing antigovernment attitude that Okinawans have expressed over the textbook issue, the governor, for the

time being, is unable to take a progovernment stance with regard to the Futenma issue, even though he is a conservative.

Government officials should have foreseen that the textbook problem, as a result of efforts by the Abe administration to "depart from the postwar regime," could present a major stumbling block to the proposed realignment of U.S. bases in Okinawa, which is being promoted by the Japanese and U.S. governments. The confusion shows poor coordination within the Abe administration.

Democratic Party of Japan leader Ichiro Ozawa, believing that Japan should not blindly follow U.S. policy, drove Abe to resign by expressing opposition to the proposed extension of the special antiterrorism law that offers a legal basis for the Marine Self-Defense Force's refueling of coalition ships in the Indian Ocean.

The government should be ready to deal with the harsh position that the DPJ will take regarding the U.S. military realignment in Japan. As soon as it takes power, the incoming administration of the next prime minister is likely to be forced to rescind textbook censors' decision regarding the mass suicides in Okinawa in order to lay a foundation for the smooth realignment of U.S. military installations.

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