

Japan angry at U.S. military's failure to contain spread of Omicron variant

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Okinawa Governor Denny Tamaki explains the spread of Omicron in the prefecture during an emergency news conference at the prefectural government building, Japan, on January 2, 2022.

Tokyo, January 4 (RHC)-- The top government officials in Japan's Okinawa prefecture have blasted the U.S. military for failing to contain the COVID-19 outbreak at its bases in the country and allowing the Omicron variant to spill over to the local population.

The southernmost prefecture, comprising a few dozen islands, reported 130 new COVID-19 cases on January 3rd, the highest single-day tally since September 25, with fingers being pointed at Americans. “I am outraged because the sharp increase in the number of infected among US military personnel suggests that their management is insufficient,” Okinawa governor, Denny Tamaki, said at a press conference on Sunday, fuming over the callousness of American authorities.

According to Tamaki, 45 new Omicron infections were identified in the prefecture, which is home to more than half the 47,000 U.S. troops in Japan, between December 31st and January 1st. On Monday, officials in Okinawa said the outbreak of COVID-19 at the US military’s Camp Hansen on December 15 had spread to eight other U.S. bases in the country, infecting 832 military personnel and people who were in contact with them.

U.S. forces reported 70 new coronavirus cases among their personnel stationed in Okinawa on Sunday, a day after a single-day record high of 235 new infections was recorded.

Tamaki accused the U.S. military personnel of spreading the Omicron variant to local communities. He also called for an overhaul of the Japan-US Status of Forces Agreement, which has not seen any amendments since it came into force in 1960.

Based on the agreement, U.S. military personnel are not subject to Japanese law, which means the measures taken by Japan to make its borders safe from the virus do not apply on them. “I urge both the Japanese and US governments to have a strong sense of alarm that (the prevalence of the virus is caused by) a systemic problem,” Tamaki stressed.

The U.S. military has come under scrutiny for keeping information about the recent outbreaks under wraps. Okinawa residents have also complained that American troops leave their camps unmasked.

Tamaki had on December 21st urged the U.S. military personnel to be confined to their bases in order to avert the spread of infections to the prefecture’s civilian population. In response, the U.S. authorities claimed they were making progress in containing the outbreak but made no mention of the request to limit troop movements, according to reports.

Okinawa — the poorest prefecture in Japan — is the reluctant host to 31 U.S. military bases, which occupy approximately 15 percent of the main island. Although the prefecture consists of less than one percent of Japan’s total land mass, it has 70 percent of the country’s U.S. facilities – 11 of the bases in Okinawa belong to the U.S. Marine Corps.

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