

Okinawa set for referendum on U.S. base relocation



Tokyo, February 18 (RHC)-- Official campaigning is underway on Japan's island of Okinawa for a referendum on a controversial plan to relocate a U.S. airbase, which has long been a source of concern for residents on the tiny island. According to reports, the non-binding vote is scheduled to be held next Sunday, February 24th.

Voters will be offered three choices to answer in the referendum; they should answer "yes," "no" or "neither" to a question if they support the relocation of the U.S. Marine Corps Futenma Air Station to remote coastal region of Henoko.

The relocation plan, backed by the government of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, offers the closing of the base, currently located in the densely-populated part of the island and opening of a replacement facility some fifty kilometers away at Nago district. The plan, however, is not supported by the officials in Okinawa.

Okinawa governor Denny Tamaki denounced the central government move, saying he hopes the referendum will offer Okinawans an opportunity to voice their opposition to the move. Although the vote is not legally binding, Tamaki offered campaigning against the plan.

Local media reported that those opposed to the plan took to the streets to voice their opposition. People also held rallies in the capital of Naha and Henoko to call on people to vote "no" in the referendum.

An ordinance on the referendum says the governor must notify Prime Minister Abe and U.S. President Donald Trump following the outcome of the vote. The local government must "respect" the outcome of a referendum if it's approved by at least a quarter of eligible voters.

Okinawa hosts more than half of the nearly 47,000 American military service members stationed in Japan. While Tokyo insists that the base is necessary on the island, residents oppose the presence of U.S. forces in the homeland. They argue that moving the base to another part of Japan is not a solution, since it would still pose an environmental threat.

Okinawa residents have long demanded that the U.S. base be totally removed from the island citing numerous cases of sexual abuse by the American soldiers. Anti-U.S. sentiments have even been on the rise after an American soldier was found guilty in December 2017 for rape and murder of a 20-year-old Okinawa woman.

Kenneth Franklin Shinzato, who worked at the Kadena air base in Okinawa, admitted to charges of rape resulting in death of Rina Shimabukuro in April 2016. Late last year, a high court in Japan upheld a lower court's ruling that sentenced Shinzato to life in prison.

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