

Japan's Okinawa marks half century since U.S. handover amid regional protests

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Tokyo, May 16 (RHC)-- The Japanese island chain of Okinawa has marked the 50th anniversary of the end of U.S. occupation after 27 years and its return to Japan amid protests against a continued heavy U.S. military presence and lack of support from the mainland.

The post-World War II US occupation of Japan lasted until 1952, but it took another 20 years for Okinawa, a string of tropical islands off far southwest Japan, to regain its sovereignty.

On May 15, 1972, the islands were finally returned to Japan, but they still host the majority of American military bases in Japan. The anniversary is being marked on Sunday with official ceremonies, but behind the pleasantries are longstanding concerns for Okinawans about the U.S. troop presence and more recent worries about the threat of a military confrontation involving China.

"I'm not in the mood to celebrate at all," Okinawan native Jinshiro Motoyama told AFP ahead of the anniversary as he sat outside a Tokyo government building on a week-long hunger strike.

Many Okinawans feel the region bears an unfair burden in hosting the majority of nearly 55,000 U.S. military personnel in Japan and is protesting to draw attention to the issue. "Only when issues surrounding US bases have been resolved in a way that satisfies Okinawans can we celebrate," said Motoyama, a 30-year-old graduate student.

Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, who promised to make a greater effort to reduce hosting U.S. military bases in the region, also acknowledged the issue as well as the economic inequalities that still make Okinawa one of the country's poorest areas.

"Even now, fifty years on, Okinawa still bears a heavy burden," said Kishida in remarks at a government ceremony in Okinawa.

Meanwhile, hundreds of protesters staged a rally Saturday in Okinawa, demanding a speedier reduction of US military forces amid growing fear that it may become a frontline of conflict amid rising China tensions.

"If land taken by the U.S. military is returned to the prefecture for other use, it would produce three times more income for Okinawa than the island now makes from bases," said Okinawa Gov. Denny Tamaki recently.

Because of the U.S. bases, Okinawa faces burdens including noise, pollution, accidents and crime related to American troops, Okinawan officials and residents say. Japanese locals on Okinawa have already been expressing serious reservations about the presence of US forces on the island, where a U.S. camp is based.

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