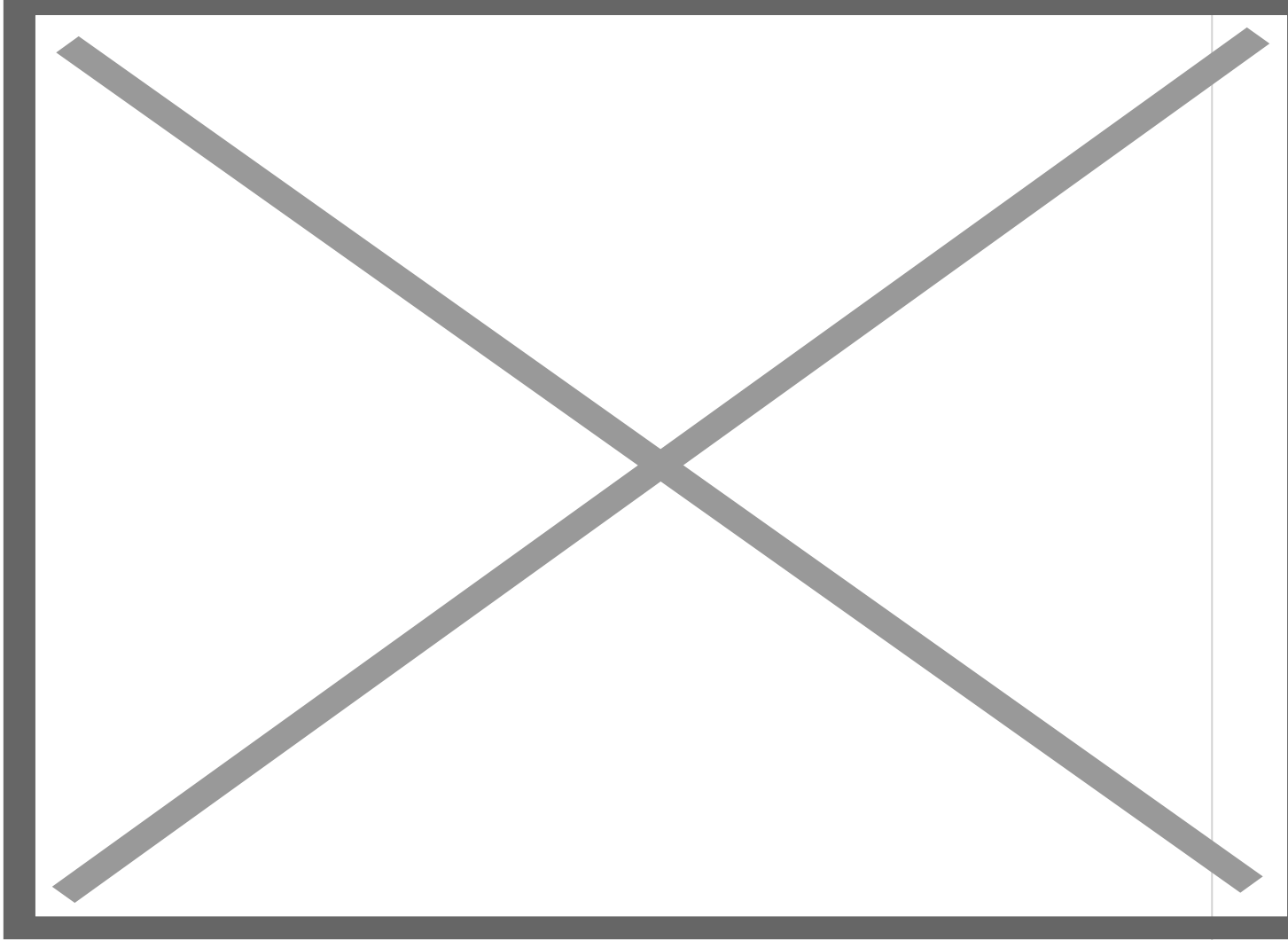


Japan protests sexual assault accusations involving U.S. military in Okinawa

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Protesters raise placards during a rally opposing the relocation of a key U.S. military base in Japan's southern island of Okinawa [File: Kyodo/Reuters]

Tokyo, June 29 (RHC)-- Japan has lodged a protest at the United States embassy in Tokyo over at least two alleged sexual assault cases involving American service members in the southern Japanese island of Okinawa that were only recently made public.

Japan's Vice Foreign Minister Masataka Okano met the U.S. ambassador to Japan, Rahm Emanuel, on Friday, requesting disciplinary and preventive measures over the two attacks, which occurred within months of each other in December and May.

"Criminal cases and accidents by U.S. military personnel cause great anxiety to local residents, and they should never occur in the first place," Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshimasa Hayashi told reporters.

Prosecutors in Naha, the capital of Okinawa, had earlier this month charged a 21-year-old U.S. Marine Corps member with non-consensual sex and assault, allegedly committed in May, Hayashi said. An Okinawa police spokesman said the woman had been "bitten in the mouth" and had taken two weeks to fully recover. Media reports said she had also been choked.

The case came to light just days after it emerged that a 25-year-old U.S. airman in Okinawa had been charged in March with raping a teenage girl three months earlier.

Brigadier General Nicholas Evans, commander of the 18th Wing at Kadena Air Base in Okinawa, said on Thursday that he was "deeply concerned" about the "severity" of the allegations. "I regret the anxiety this has caused," he said. He promised the U.S. military will fully cooperate with the investigation by the local authorities and the courts.

Both cases have caused outrage, stoking tensions among residents over U.S. military bases in the region. Okinawa residents have long complained about accidents and crime related to the bases, expressing anger over the lack of disclosure.

The case involving the teenager is a reminder to many Okinawans of the rape in 1995 of a 12-year-old girl by three U.S. service members, which prompted large protests against the heavy US troop presence on the island.

It led to a 1996 agreement between Japan and the United States on the closure of a key US air station, though the plan has been delayed due to protests at the relocation site on another part of the island.

Some 50,000 U.S. troops are deployed in Japan under a bilateral security pact, about half of them in Okinawa. The island's strategic role is seen as increasingly important for the Japan-US military alliance in the face of growing tensions with China.

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