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Peace longings of the Japanese people

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NCR Today

The following open letter to President Obama was written by Mercedarian Missionaries Sister Filo Hirota Nov. at the outset of his first visit to Japan last week. She shares with the president some of the feelings of many Japanese who have worked for world peace for many years.

Rome

Dear President Obama,

Our heart-felt welcome to Japan as you make your first visit in this part of the world. Needless to say we were very happy with the historic victory of American people who voted for CHANGE not only for the U.S. but also for the world.

One of the issues you will discuss with the political leaders of Japan will be that of peace and security in Asia-Pacific. This is the reason for this letter from a Japanese Catholic woman religious who has been working for peace and justice together with many sisters and brothers in the world for many years. I would like to tell you what ordinary Okinawans have been experiencing in their beautiful islands where 75 percent of U.S. military bases in Japan are located. Okinawa is one of the locations in Japan, which hosts a total of 134 U.S. military installations, the expense of which is covered by our tax money.

On November 6, Sunday, 21,000 protesters gathered in Ginowan, Okinawa, to demand that Mr. Hatoyama fulfill his party's earlier promises to move the bases off Okinawa. The U.S. military bases occupy about 20 percent of the main island of Okinawa where 27,000 soldiers are stationed together with their families and dependents of more than 20,000. Their military training, lives, education opportunities and recreations are safely provided on the bases, guarded by fences and gates. Contrary to their assured safety, lives of women and children of local community have been targets of violence for the past 58 years.

Decades of complaints about the bases here and others on the island have gone largely unheeded, and a painstakingly negotiated plan to move the Marines from populated areas remains years from completion. The U.S. government initially agreed to move Futenma Base with its flight paths running directly over crowded neighborhoods in 1996 after a public outcry over the rape of a 12-year-old schoolgirl by three American servicemen.

The 2006 deal to move the Marines to a V-shaped airfield to be constructed near the fishing village of Henoko only angered many Okinawans. The proposed new U.S. airbase construction at Henoko in Okinawa will harm fragile coral reefs and the habitat of Japan's last remaining dugong population. Greenpeace urges the U.S. and Japanese governments to call off this project immediately. A recent opinion poll also suggests that a large majority of Okinawans want the airfield to move outside Okinawa, or even outside Japan.

Anger here also runs high at the Obama administration after Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates's visit to Tokyo in October. When Mr. Gates warned that any changes might undo a broader agreement with Washington to move about 8,000 Marines to Guam, he was criticized in the Japanese news media as a bully.

Article 9 of Japan's peace constitution says:

Aspiring sincerely to an international peace based on justice and order, the Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as means of settling international disputes. (2) To accomplish the aim of the preceding paragraph, land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained. The right of belligerency of the state will not be recognized.

During the administration of Mr. Bush, there was much pressure to revise Article 9 so that U.S.-Japan alliance be militarily "more mature". The policy of our Liberal Democratic Party supported the "War on Terror" in violation of Article 9. According to the recent survey 78 percent of the Japanese people want to maintain Article 9 of our Constitution. A nuclear bomb survivor from Nagasaki once told me, "The suffering of the Atomic Bomb is the price we paid for Article 9. We need to concretize the spirit and praxis of Article 9 which is constitutional non-violence at all levels of our lives on the planet earth.

Mr. President, you promised change and change is what we need especially for Okinawa so that the island characterized by so much violence become an island of peace and hope. May God of Compassion, Justice and Non-violence accompany you in your journey. May God of Tenderness bless you and your family with joy and hope.

Sr. Filo Hirota is a General Councilor and JPIC promoter. The JPIC Commission was created jointly in Rome by the Union of Superiors General (USG) and International Union of Superiors General (UISG).

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