



## Sex crimes and prostitution

The heady mix of machismo and militarism that pervades US army bases generally means trouble for relations with local women. The areas surrounding many bases have high levels of prostitution, while the government agreements protecting US soldiers from prosecution mean that sex crimes are rarely met with adequate severity.

US military authorities have tended toward the idea that prostitution provides a useful way for soldiers stationed thousands of miles from wives or girlfriends to “let off steam”. The welfare of the women providing these “rest and recreational” opportunities is rarely of concern: prostitution around bases and ports used by US navy ships in the Philippines and Thailand fuels the trafficking of women throughout south-east Asia, while living conditions and standards of health amongst sex workers are often low. The attitude of US army doctors to local women seeking HIV tests illustrates military attitudes – women are tested to ensure that they are a safe, HIV-free commodity for the soldiers, but are not offered safe sex advice or supplies to protect themselves.

While military chiefs are able to dismiss the welfare of sex workers as an issue of the women's professional choice, reality shows a more complex situation, with many women not selecting this as a profession but regarding themselves as genuine partners who are then shocked to find themselves abandoned when military personnel move on. It is estimated that since 1945 there have been 50,000 unacknowledged children of US soldiers in the Philippines alone, and these receive none of the benefits of US military families, such as healthcare, housing and education. Similar problems have been

reported around US bases in Germany and the UK.

The most extreme examples of the use and abuse of women by the US military are found in the high rate of sex crimes, including pedophilia, around army bases. High profile examples, such as the grotesquely sexualised murder of a young woman bar worker by a US serviceman in Korea in 1992 and the rape of a 12 year old girl in Okinawa by three GIs in 1995 are just the visible end of the everyday difficulties faced by women and girls in base towns from Honduras to Guam to Labrador. Studies from the US occupation of Japan in the 1950s show soldiers giving rape victims rationed food items, in order to turn the crime – at least in the perpetrator's eyes – into a commercial event encouraged by military policy. In its continued condoning of the use of large-scale prostitution and its refusal to take responsibility for the safety of women around its bases, the US military's attitudes continue to facilitate the use of women as objects in this way.

## Okinawa

Seventy-five per cent of the US bases in Japan are concentrated on Okinawa, a tiny island occupying just 0.6 per cent of the country's land area. These occupy many of the island's best agricultural and fishing sites, as well as causing serious environmental and noise pollution. The bases have resulted in high crime rates, and a disturbing level of sexual violence, as Suzuyo Takasato of Okinawa Women Act Against Military Violence, explains:

“Okinawa is a place where the armed forces have learnt how to kill and hurt people in close proximity to the local population for more than 60 years. This situation breeds a structural violence, rather

than one that can be understood simply in terms of the crimes of individual soldiers.

“When a 12-year-old girl was raped by three US soldiers in September 1995, an infamous case, the shock was too enormous for society to remain silent. But there is a long history of violence and harassment on Okinawa derived from the presence of the US bases.

“In the post-war period, including after the Battle of Okinawa and during the Korean War, the whole of Okinawa turned into a land without law. US soldiers raped women, threatening them at gunpoint in crop fields and on the streets, and even abducting them in front of their families. Many unwanted and forced pregnancies resulted as female Okinawans of all ages were targeted. The victims of sexual violence on the island included a nine-month old baby in 1949 and a little girl of six years old, who was raped and killed in 1955.

“During the Vietnam War, the terrible violence committed by US soldiers, operating in an extremely unstable and frantic psychological condition was also directed towards women working in areas surrounding the US bases. At that time, two to four people were strangled to death each year, and many women in the area lived in fear of this fate.

“Okinawa reverted to Japanese administration in 1972 but the violence continued, and even became more chronic. There were a number of rapes and attempted rapes, as well as sexual abuse in public areas and even a case where a private house was invaded. The victims included a 10 year-old girl and a 14 year-old girl.

“When the 1995 rape case of a girl happened, I

was hosting a workshop with other Okinawan women at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing on the topic of 'Military Violence against Women in Okinawa'. When we returned home and learnt more about the case, we decided to break the silence that was a supplement to the violence. We established 'Okinawa Women Act against Military Violence', an association to stop military power and violence. At the same time, we opened the 'Rape Emergency Intervention Counseling Centre – Okinawa', which offers supports to the victims of sexual violence. We made a chronology of sex crimes against women by US soldiers in the post-war period, which shed light on the previously unknown level of this violence. We also organised a 'Peace Caravan to the USA' in 1996 and 1998 to make US citizens aware of the realities of their soldiers' activities and discuss with them. In 1997, we formed the 'East Asia-US-Puerto Rico Women's Network Against Militarism' together with women from the Philippines, Korea, the USA and Puerto Rico, where we share our experiences on the negative impacts of the bases to women, children and environment, learn collectively from our own activities, and support each other. In Okinawa itself, 34 organisations came together in 1999 to launch the 'Okinawa Citizens' Network', of which I am one of the coordinators.

"The bases remain, however, and a new 'floating' facility is being constructed in Henoko Bay, also in Okinawa province, as a replacement for the dangerous Futenma base. A citizens' referendum showed a clear 'no' to this new base, while various citizens' groups engaged in resistance actions on the sea for more than 600 days, forcing construction plans to stop. It was the victory of the power of hope: believing in life, peace and co-existence."