

Mayor's Comment

“19 Years since the U.S. Military Helicopter Crash at Okinawa International University”

At approximately 2:15 p.m. on Friday, August 13, 2004, a U.S. marine's CH-53D helicopter that was being deployed to Futenma Air Station crashed into the Okinawa International University and burst into flames.

The incident shook Okinawans to the core and once again highlighted how dangerous it is for Futenma Air Station to be in the middle of a populated city.

Recognizing the dangers posed by the air station, said to be “the most dangerous base in the world,” in 1996, Japan and the U.S. agreed on the complete return of the base to Okinawa “within 5 to 7 years.” The agreement was a symbol of the collaborative effort to mitigate the U.S. military bases' burden on Okinawa. Nevertheless, the land was not returned, and merely 8 years after the agreement, the accident that our residents had long dreaded ultimately happened.

Although this crash should have made everyone keenly aware of the urgent need to remove the base and its dangers, 19 years after the accident, the land remains unreturned. In the years since the crash, many other accidents occurred. In December 2017, the window of a U.S. military CH-53E helicopter detached and fell onto the grounds of Futenma Daini Elementary School. In April 2020, a large volume of fire-fighting foam containing PFOS leaked off the base and spilled onto nearby streets. In August 2021, the U.S. military unilaterally released PFAS-containing water that was stored in the Futenma Air Station into our public wastewater system despite our request that the water be disposed of thermally. In November of the same year, a water bottle fell from an aircraft that belonged to Futenma Air Station onto a residential area. To this day, our residents continue to live under fear and unease.

To further aggravate the situation, our residents are constantly plagued by loud aircraft noises that continue late into the night and an inefficient traffic system that was forced to develop irregularly in order to bypass the air station. It is clear that the burden imposed on our residents has already exceeded acceptable limits.

The original purpose of the Futenma return agreement was to remove the dangers and reduce the burden of hosting the military base. Indefinite use of Futenma Air Station should never be allowed.

Twenty-seven years since the land return agreement and 19 years since the helicopter crash, the promise to return Futenma Air Station remains unfulfilled. I urge both the Japan and U.S. governments as well as the people of Okinawa and Japan to think about how our citizens' earnest wishes continue to be ignored and the weight of the time gone by.

Though we cannot change the past, for our children's future, I vow to do everything in my power to make sure the land will be returned and well-utilized after its return, as it is the dream of Ginowanians and Okinawans.

We must not allow Futenma Air Station to stay permanently or continue its operation in the center of our city. To ensure that this issue is not passed onto the next generation, we will take every possible measure and persevere in our efforts towards ensuring the prompt return of land and that the hazards and burdens of hosting the base is visibly reduced in the meantime.

August 13, 2023
Masanori Matsugawa
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