

Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples
12th session in July 2019
Oral Statement by Shimin Gaikou Centre (Japan)

Thank you. We would like to update the recent situation of the Ryukyuan peoples in Okinawa, Japan.

As a continuing issue, the concentration of the US military base in their territory remains problematic, and the Government of Japan has been attempting to relocate one of the military bases in the main island of Okinawa to another place in the same island, called Henoko. In multiple occasions such as elections of prefectural governors, people in Okinawa have stood against this government's relocation plan by choosing the governors who campaigned against it. Notably, in February 2019, there was also an Okinawa prefectural referendum in which people were asked whether they support or oppose the relocation plan, and more than 70 % of the votes, which were more than 430,000 votes, went against it.

Under Article 30 of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, the state has an obligation to "undertake effective consultations" for military activities in Indigenous peoples' land. However, the Government of Japan says that the result of the referendum is not legally binding, and it continues the construction.

Another recent issue that Ryukyuan peoples face is the repatriation of human remains from Kyoto University, one of the national universities in Japan. Particularly, Ryukyuan representatives filed a court case against the university in December 2018. The focus of this ongoing lawsuit is on human remains taken away in the 1920s from one of the graves in the main island of Okinawa without any consultation or consent from the people in the region. Twenty-six of them are preserved at Kyoto University. The university, however, asserts its legality of possessing these remains and argues for the dismissal of the request. According to Article 12 of the UN Declaration, Indigenous peoples have a right to the repatriation of their ancestral remains, and states have an obligation to ensure it. Nonetheless, the Japanese Government has not commented on this matter.

One of the prominent difficulties running through these issues is that the Government of Japan has not recognised the Ryukyuan peoples as Indigenous peoples, and also fails to provide any concrete reason for this. However, the Ryukyuan peoples have been recognised as Indigenous peoples internationally, including by the UN Human Rights Committee and the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination.

Therefore, we request the Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples to review the situation and to provide necessary assistance with the Japanese Government: firstly, to establish an independent expert committee to verify the history of how Okinawa became a part of Japan; secondly, to respect the result of the referendum that showed Okinawan peoples' will against the relocation plan to Henoko; and thirdly, to work with Kyoto University or other educational institutions to repatriate Ryukyuan peoples' ancestral human remains.

Thank you.