

Statement by the President of Okinawa International University regarding the USMC helicopter crash and request for the closure of USMC Futenma Air Station

I would like to express my gratitude to Mr. Chairman and Members of the Commission on Review of Overseas Military Facility Structure of the United States for this opportunity to submit my statement regarding the August 13 crash of United States Marine Corps CH-53D helicopter on the campus of Okinawa International University, Ginowan, Okinawa.

I, as the president of Okinawa International University (OIU, hereafter), submit this statement to inform you of the extent of the damage caused by the crash onto the university community. Because our campus is located right next to the USMC Futenma Air Station, the flights in and out of the base have been an unbearable obstacle to the educational mission of OIU. Now with the long-feared crash onto our campus having actually happened, we sincerely ask for the prompt closure of the Futenma Air Station.

I The August 13 Crash

Although the crash occurred during the summer recess period, there were university personnel on campus, including administrative staff, students and faculty members of the summer intensive courses, and students participating in extra-curricular activities. More than seven hundred people were at OIU at the time of the crash. Had the helicopter crashed 50 yards or so away into the classroom building, a far more serious consequence would have been a certainty. To the west of the crash site there is a faculty parking lot and a gasoline service station adjacent to it. Had it occurred there, a gasoline tank explosion could have been triggered and we do not want to think about its aftermath.

The main administrative building suffered severe collision damage on its outer wall and the fire escape stairwell. When the helicopter collided with the building, the main rotor hit the wall and shot numerous chunks of concrete in many directions beyond the campus, as far as a quarter of a mile. It was a true miracle that they killed nobody.

The building's first floor office windows right next to the crash site were blown away. Some staff members in the office survived the impact only because they happened to be behind thick pillars. The wall of the faculty union's office on the third floor partially collapsed. If there had been a meeting in the room, serious bodily injury could not have been avoided.

Outside the building the main Internet cable was severed and caused serious damage to the operation of OIU for several days. In addition, several trees were damaged and burnt. Some of the trees were planted when the university was established. OIU lost quiet witnesses of our history.

II Aftermath of the Crash: University Functions

The main administrative building has been vacated. It is still closed due to damage. All the offices in the building are spread around several locations on the campus: a large conference room and other meeting rooms of the OIU library building; some rooms in the gymnasium; and any other available spaces on the campus. Because of the noble efforts by the staff members, OIU has been operating without serious problems. However, the situation has lasted almost three months now and the burden on the staff and administration has taken its tolls.

After the crash, the USMC closed off the area around the crash site. Until the wreckage of the helicopter was retrieved, even I, the president of the university, had been prohibited from entering the building and the crash site. It was undoubtedly an unthinkable situation. It must be very easy to comprehend what kind of adversity we had to face.

III Aftermath of the Crash: Contamination

According to many eyewitness accounts, some of the US military personnel were wearing the yellow protective gear and using Geiger counters at the site before the wreckage was removed. This raised concern over the nature of the cargo on the helicopter. According to the soil examinations conducted by the Okinawa prefecture government and OIU, there was not a level of radioactivity in the soil that could

affect health and the fear of nuclear contamination, especially contamination from depleted uranium ammunitions, was cleared. However, during this period, the US Embassy announced that one of six cases that contain radioactive material "strontium 90" was missing, which were used as parts of IBIS safety sensor of the main rotor. The missing case was attached to the main rotor. According to the US Embassy press release, it is likely that the missing case burnt out and evaporated after the explosion and radioactivity of strontium 90 is too weak to affect human health. Nevertheless, it could cause serious health risk if the evaporated strontium 90 is inhaled and stays in the body of a person, many experts point out.

There was serious concern over the soil and underground water contamination at the crash site. The soil examinations conducted by Okinawa prefecture government and OIU indicate that soil contamination exceeding the limit set by the Soil Pollution Prevention Law was found only in the small area very close to the crash site. Those tests also did not show sign of underground water contamination yet. However, benzene, fluorine, and lead were detected in the soil and they could cause of serious health risks. It is necessary to determine the exact area of the contamination and to take some measures, including changing the soil, to prevent any problem from developing. In addition, OIU had used the underground water from a well near the crash site for air conditioning system and lavatories. Because of the possible underground water contamination, we stopped using the well and switched to tap water. Thus this water costs have been added to the financial burden caused by the crash. Since it takes considerable time for material in the soil to reach underground water system, it is necessary to continue the monitoring for a prolonged time.

IV Aftermath of the Crash: Psychological Damage

A Considerable number of OIU community members have suffered from psychological damage, including post-traumatic stress disorder. The internal survey of the OIU student body regarding psychological effects of the crash is in process at this moment. A preliminary report indicates that a remarkably high percentage of students who directly witnessed the crash listed some symptoms of PTSD: 54%, 113 students out of 211 surveyed. A considerable portion of students who did not witness the crash real time also showed signs of PTSD: 21%, 1122 out of 5239. This result

clearly shows that the crash left significant negative effects on the OIU students.

V Request from OIU

OIU was established in 1972, the year of Okinawa Reversion to Japan. Since then, OIU has produced many outstanding graduates. OIU is now the largest private university in Okinawa. We have been trying to be a campus open to the local community, thus we offer many outreach programs and extension courses to the outside community. It is needless to say that OIU has become an irreplaceable higher education institution.

From the foundation, we have been forced to endure our disadvantageous location, that is, right next to the Futenma Air Station. Still we have succeeded in growing into a respected institution. There were remains of rural and agricultural villages in the area surrounding the Futenma Air Station in 1972. Urbanization during the past three decades has changed the condition drastically; any flight in and out of Futenma cannot avoid flying over crowded areas.

OIU has constantly suffered from noise pollution. Despite the noise-proof facilities built with the Japanese subsidies for base-hosting communities, helicopter flights interrupt our classes daily. It is an extremely regrettable educational condition. Futenma aircrafts are literally within shouting distance from our classrooms and faculty offices. There is no way to contain noise pollution completely.

And now we have experienced this horrendous crash on our campus. We have always been aware of the possibility of an aircraft crash, and the danger caused by such an accident. Indeed there was an incident of a fallen fuel tank from a US reconnaissance airplane onto OIU campus in 1972. Yet, we are deeply shocked by this crash. The official report of the crash investigation reveals that the cause was overworking of maintenance crew. This finding was doubly shocking because the same thing could have happened to any aircraft of the Futenma Air Station.

It is obvious now that USMC Futenma Air Station is an unacceptable threat to OIU in our efforts to fulfill our educational mission and take social responsibility to provide safe educational environment to our students. In order to protect our

students and all the people of the OIU community, we have no other choice than requesting the prompt closure of the Futenma Air Station. Needless to say, we, as a university, are prohibited from political activities by a law. We do not have any intension to be engaged in political activities. However, for us, to request the prompt closure of the Futenma Air Station is not a political activity, but an essential effort to improve educational conditions.

I herein strongly request the prompt closure of USMC Futenma Air Station.

Tomoaki Toguchi, Ph.D.

President

Chairman of the Board of Trustees

Okinawa International University