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| **U.S., Japan agree to fight health hazard near NAF Atsugi *Joint monitoring, air filters among changes discussed for local incinerator*** Linda D. Kozaryn, American Forces Press Service |

**ATSUGI NAVAL AIR FACILITY, Japan** -- Defense Secretary William S. Cohen and Japanese Defense Minister Tsutomu Kawara have outlined an agreement to deal with a problem that has plagued Sailors, Marines and their families based here for many years.

Dioxin-bearing emissions from the Shinkampo waste-treatment facility pose a health risk to 6,000 service members and U.S. and Japanese civilian employees at this naval air facility 28 miles southwest of Tokyo. Roughly 3,000 families live in base housing directly in the path of the smoke.

U.S. officials first asked Japanese officials to resolve the situation in 1992. The United States recently expressed strong dissatisfaction about the lack of progress on the issue. Kawara visited the base March 15, a day before Cohen's scheduled visit here.

"It is clear that the status quo cannot be maintained," Cohen said March 16 after touring the base. The pollution poses "a significant health risk," he said.

"We do not expect our men and women who are serving in the military and those who are supporting them to have to incur this kind of exposure," he said. "I am confident we will have action taken. We cannot have the kind of health hazard that our people are exposed to. "This is a serious matter to the United States and to the Japanese as well. The question becomes what actions can be taken in the short term to reduce, if not eliminate, the hazard that's posed to all in the area," Cohen said. "If it can't be cleaned up, then it should be shut down."

After a meeting at the Japanese Defense Agency, Cohen and Kawara announced the Japanese government has agreed to changes at the facility.

These include:

- Ensuring the facility owner finishes installing special filters on two of its three incinerators by the end of March and stops operating the third incinerator until a filter is installed.

- Conducting joint monitoring to survey the air as long as both sides deem it necessary.

- Building a 100-meter-tall smokestack.

- Conducting on-site inspections and taking appropriate measures if problems are found.

- Providing U.S. service members and dependents no-cost alternative housing pending completion of the smokestack.

"This is the Navy's biggest headache in Japan," Navy spokesman Lt. Cmdr. Jamie Graybeal told reporters traveling with Cohen. "The incinerators sit in a 13-meter deep valley and the three stacks are 27 meters tall," he explained. "Consequently, the stack emissions blow across the housing facility at about the third-story level."

The emissions carry chemicals known to cause cancer and upper respiratory disease, Graybeal said. A joint U.S.-Japan monitoring survey last summer found record-setting levels of dioxins, up to nearly 70 times the level set by

Japan's environmental standards, he said. The plant burns twice its permitted daily 90-ton capacity and it burns the waste at low temperatures.

"Dioxins are caused not by a particular substance, but by incomplete combustion," Graybeal said.

Six months out of the year, during the summer, the winds blow directly toward the base and "fumigate" on-base housing, he said. The winds shift the other six months and blow the plume into the Japanese industrial park and Japanese residences.

U.S. service members accompanied by their families generally serve three-year tours at Atsugi. Offered the option of living off-base, most choose to stay on base despite the pollution problem, Graybeal said.

"The living conditions in government housing are far better than in town," he said. "There's more square footage, and they're cheaper to heat -- electricity is very expensive here and there's no insulation. Rarely is there anywhere in the neighborhood for kids to play. They've got to commute to school. So for a number of those reasons, people find itmore convenient to live here on base."

The Navy provides air-filtering equipment to help combat the pollution. Parents keep their children indoors when the wind is blowing the plume on base. Parents also worry about the long-term effects of living at Atsugi on their children. People who live in the government quarters about 250 meters from the plant say they experience headaches, breathing problems, skin rashes, nausea and eye, nose and throat irritation.

Navy health officials are in the process of doing a comprehensive health assessment. They plan to release results this summer that "will articulate the actual health risk our residents are facing," Graybeal said.