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(4) No solution visible to Atsugi base dioxin pollution

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Enormous dioxin emissions from an industrial complex of incinerators near a U.S. base in Japan have now become a serious problem between Japan and the United States. The incinerator facility—which is located near the U.S. Navy's Atsugi base in the Kanagawa prefectural city of Ayase—is run by Envirotech Co. (formerly known as Shinkampo), a private-sector industrial waste disposal firm. Meanwhile, U.S. Secretary of Defense Cohen will arrive in Japan on March 15, and the problem will likely be taken up also in his meeting with Defense Agency Director General Kawara. However, there are still no prospects obtained for a solution to the problem. The Atsugi base dioxin problem is now about to strain the Japan-U.S. alliance, as well as the issue of scaling back Japan's host nation support or the so-called "sympathy budget" for U.S. forces stationed in Japan and the issue of setting a 15-year time limit on the U.S. military's use of an alternate facility for Futenma airfield.

Filter installation's effects questioned

Concerning smokestack emissions from Envirotech's industrial waste disposal facility, the U.S. military asked the Japanese government in 1992 to take improvement measures against possible pollutants. Since then, the U.S. government has taken every opportunity to ask the Japanese government for proper action. In 1999, the Japanese government and the U.S. military conducted their first joint environmental monitoring survey. As a result, the survey detected a maximum of 53 picograms per cubic meter in the air—66 times higher than the environmental standard set by the Environment Agency. This enlivened the U.S. side.

At the U.S. side's request, the Japanese government agreed with the U.S. government to have Envirotech install bag house filters on its incinerators in order to reduce their dioxin emissions. The two governments also agreed to have the company replace its current smokestack with a 100-meter one for smoke diffusion. Reflecting on the monitoring of dioxins at 53 picograms, the Kanagawa prefectural government recommended Environtech under a waste disposal and clean-up law to install bag house filters on its incinerators. The company, now in the process of installing filters on all of its incinerators, will finish up the installation work this May.

However, the U.S. military and the company are both skeptical of the filter installation's effectiveness. Also, there is no progress in the government's talks with the company about its proposal of building a 100-meter smokestack, and it would be difficult to have it built by April 2001. The U.S. side has referred to the possibility of taking legal action to have the plant stop its operation. However, the Kanagawa prefectural government, which is competent over the company's plant operation license, says it would be impossible to have the company suspend its plant operation because the company has complied with the prefectural government's improvement recommendation.

Law cleared, but facility acquisition difficult; Government at a loss with no drastic measure

Envirotech is now installing bag house filters on its incinerators to get rid of harmful substances, and the Defense Facilities Administration Agency earmarks 1.1 billion yen for its plan to have a 100-meter smokestack built for smoke diffusion in fiscal 2000.

After a cabinet meeting on March 10, the government held a meeting of the ministers concerned to discuss how to cope with the problem. The meeting was held under Defense Agency Director General Tsutomu Kawara's initiative with the participation of Chief Cabinet Secretary Mikio Aoki, Foreign Minister Yohei Kono, Health and Welfare Minister Yuya Niwa, and Environment Agency Director General Kayoko Shimizu. In the meeting, Kawara proposed cooperation. As a result, the government confirmed its course of action to address the problem not only among its ministries and agencies concerned but also with the Kanagawa prefectural government and Envirotec while holding consultations.

However, the Envirotech facility itself is not illegal, so the government actually remains unable to find any drastic measure like taking action to have the facility stop its operation. Some in the Foreign Ministry and other government offices are looking into the possibility of an emergency choice for the government to buy up the facility itself. However, such an idea is hardly feasible.

A senior official of the Foreign Ministry says, "This problem has been unsettled for years, and the United States also understands that it would be difficult to find out an immediate solution to the problem. We also have no choice but to explain this matter in a tenacious manner." Furthermore, some in the government fear that the government may have to discuss the problem over again from the start if and when there is a change of administration in the United States. Therefore, the government is now at a loss over how to deal with the problem.

In the meantime, Defense Agency Director General Kawara has reiterated his intention to do his utmost efforts for an early settlement of the problem. Kawara plans to inspect the Envirotec incinerator facility site early next week, and then he will meet with U.S. Secretary of Defense Cohen, who is scheduled to arrive in Japan on March 15. Kawara, in his meeting with Cohen, intends to seek the U.S. side's understanding of the Japanese side's efforts for a solution to the problem.

Furthermore, the DFAA, for the time being, will restart its negotiations with Envirotec to have a higher smokestack built. Their negotiations have been suspended since October 1999. Particularly, Envirotech told the DFAA this February that it was not necessarily opposed to the proposed construction of a taller smokestack. The DFAA therefore will prepare an environment aimed at resuming negotiations after the fiscal 2000 budget passes the Diet.

Asthma spreads among servicemen's children; U.S. criticizes Japan for delay in action

In response to the Sankei Shimbun's interview, a spokesman for the U.S. Naval Forces Japan remarked that the air pollution caused by dioxin emissions has been at an unacceptable level, and that an urgent solution is needed. The U.S. Navy spokesman thus accused the Japanese government of a delay in its counteraction.

According to the spokesman, the U.S. Navy still has no data from experts, but smoky emissions are now seriously affecting the health of U.S. military personnel and their family dependents on base. The spokesman added that there has been a spread of such symptoms as asthma among U.S. servicemen's families—particularly among children.

A team of U.S. experts probed into damage to the health of U.S. military personnel and their families last year, and its results will be available this summer. Therefore, the U.S. side—depending on its findings—is certain to intensify its offensive even after the installation of bag house filters in May.

Also, the U.S. Navy spokesman took up Envirotech's disturbance of the U.S. military's monitoring of an air pollution with an infrared spectrometer that was set up in 1997. The press officer spoke for the U.S. military's irritation: "This problem is now becoming an emotional problem."

On the other hand, the U.S. Navy press officer underscored that the dioxin pollution of the Atsugi base is "an unprecedented problem also to U.S. forces deployed around the world," all the more because U.S. military bases around the world have brought about a number of environmental problems in their host countries due to their drainage and the like.

The naval spokesman reiterated the U.S. side's standpoint: "U.S. military personnel will be transferred in three years, but the Japanese employees working at the base will be affected for a long period of time." The officer thus remained cautious about his remarks being taken as "pressure" from the U.S. side. Furthermore, the United States is now desperately trying to improve the situation in order to ensure its military's stable use of bases in Japan as a pillar of its alliance with Japan.

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