

AMERICAN EMBASSY, TOKYO
POLITICAL SECTION
OFFICE OF TRANSLATION SERVICES
INQUIRIES: 03-3224-5360
INTERNET E-MAIL ADDRESS: ustkyots@ppp.bekkoame.or.jp

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MAGAZINE ARTICLE: Behind the scenes of Atsugi base dioxin pollution

[By Takashi T sugawa, freelance writer on environmental issues]

SEKAI

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At 9:00 a.m., March 16 this year, U.S. Secretary of Defense Cohen visited the U.S. Navy's Atsugi base in Kanagawa Prefecture. In one of the base hangars that is called Hangar 1430, there were gathered U.S. military personnel and their family dependents and Japanese employees, numbering several hundreds. In a driving rain that began early in the morning, most of those gathering in the hangar were disenchanted. Early the day before, Defense Agency Director General Tsutomu Kawara had visited there as if to make an alibi.

The purpose of Cohen's visit to Japan was to hold preliminary negotiations with the Japanese government on renewing a special measures agreement regarding Japan's host nation support (or the so-called "sympathy budget") for U.S. forces in Japan.

The current special agreement, which came into effect in 1978, is due to terminate next March. The Japanese government has now already decided to scale back its HNS budget. Cohen's role was to hold it in check.

The visiting Pentagon chief had another purpose, which was to urge the Japanese government to resolve the problem of hazardous smokestack emissions from a complex of industrial waste incinerators operated by Enviro-Tech (formerly known as Shinkampo) located south of the Atsugi base.

Dark sooty smoke, carried on the southeastern wind, hits the Atsugi base's high-rise housing compound and its day-care center every summer. Such a situation has continued for 12 years. Brian Murphy, an environmental protection specialist at the Atsugi base, says: "The total number of on-base bronchial and asthmatic patients consulting the clinic is three times larger than that at Yokosuka. Now, Atsugi is the 'worst one' among all U.S. military bases around the world." Growing impatient, the headquarters of the U.S. Naval Forces Japan in Yokosuka urged the Japanese government in August 1997 to stop the incinerator facility's operation immediately. Furthermore, the U.S. government lodged an official protest with the Japanese government. The problem then seemed to develop into a diplomatic issue between Japan and the United States.