[Dioxin-l] Pollution plagues Navy personnel assigned to U.S. air facility in Japan

Posted: Monday, December 20, 1999 | 6:17 a.m.

Pollution plagues Navy personnel assigned to U.S. air facility in Japan

By Phyllis W. Jordan Special To The Post-Dispatch ATSUGI NAVAL AIR FACILITY, Japan - \* Hundreds of Navy families live within a half mile of an incinerator's smokestacks in conditions that would not be permitted back home. And they are getting tired of it. Navy families at the Atsugi Naval Air Facility in Japan often keep their children indoors much of the spring and summer, watching the base TV station each day for warnings on which way the smoke is blowing from a nearby Japanese incinerator. They must cope with rashes and coughs that their children develop and drive 25 minutes out of their way to find a playground with no risk of contaminated soil. The Navy has been trying for 10 years to get the Japanese government to force the owner to improve conditions, all to no avail. Secretary of Defense William S. Cohen is now contemplating moving service members and families out of Atsugi. The wind shifts suddenly on a muggy day, and the plume of smoke rising from a Japanese incinerator blows straight toward the Navy apartment building on the hill above. The air fills with the acrid smell of burning chemicals, a stench that hangs on the tongue and makes the eyes water. What's worse, the smokestacks are leaving dangerous toxins -- particularly dioxin -- in the air and soil at the U.S. base. Test results released this fall showed dioxin in the air 70 times the Japanese standard -- and 10 times higher than ever recorded in the nation. Children under age 6 face a risk of cancer 100 times greater than that in most U.S. neighborhoods, Navy studies show. Another set of tests released Dec. 1 show that the contamination has spread to food at nearby farms, particularly chicken eggs sold off base. With hundreds of Navy families living within a half mile of the smokestacks -- in conditions that would not be permitted back home -- U.S. officials are frantic to clean up the rusted plant known as Enviro-Tech, or shut it down. A diplomatic tangle But after 10 years, $12 million and two talks on the subject between President Bill Clinton and Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi, the smokestacks still burn. Shutting down the plant has become a diplomatic tangle complicated by Japanese law, Japanese culture and the uneasy relations that U.S. military bases in Japan have with their hosts. The plant's owner offers little help. Tetsuro Murata is a convicted criminal who has admitted in court to funneling millions of the incinerator's profits to organized crime. Unmoved by the Navy's pleas to fix the plant, Murata instead demanded a higher price to sell his incinerator to the Japanese government, according to Navy documents. Japan's environmental agencies, despite a national panic over incinerator pollution and tougher new standards, have no power to close down the smokestacks. And until the joint tests released in October, officials there disputed the results of U.S. samples. Now, with those joint tests showing high levels of dioxin, the Navy and the U.S. Embassy are demanding that the plant be shut down, at least until it is fixed. Japanese officials have agreed to work toward that end and have sent stern warnings to the incinerator owner. But the warnings have done little good. Caught in the crosswind are the families of the Navy aviators who have settled at Atsugi, 25 miles southwest of Tokyo. Already this year, several families have been sent home for respiratory problems or other health reasons. Others keep their children indoors much of the spring and summer, watching the base TV station each day for warnings on which way the smoke is blowing. They cope with the rashes and coughs their children develop, they buy their dogs bottled water, they run noisy air purifiers 24 hours a day, they drive 25 minutes out of their way to find a playground with no risk of contaminated soil. And they curse that serving their country means living this way. "I realize the Navy is exhausting all means, but I'm frustrated with the Japanese government, that they don't feel it's important enough to deal with," said Michelle Ashley, who was so concerned about her children's health that she sent them to live with their grandparents in Missouri last summer. The Navy, facing its responsibility and liability for future health problems, wants to go to court and seek an injunction to shut it down. "We now have evidence to take into court, validated by the government of Japan, that (Enviro-Tech) has fumigated NAF Atsugi with the worst dioxin levels ever recorded in Japan," Capt. F.E. Crecelius, chief of staff of U.S. Naval Forces Japan, wrote in a message to the Pacific Fleet commander. The U.S. Embassy, relying on Prime Minister Obuchi's assurance that he will take responsibility for the matter, is pursuing a diplomatic course. With the new test results in hand, embassy officials say they are confident that Japan will address the problem. Drastic options "We think action needs to be taken as quickly as possible," said Christopher J. LaFleur, the embassy's deputy chief of mission. "The key issue is not so much the specific plan, it's what produces the needed result." If it doesn't work, Secretary of Defense William S. Cohen is contemplating another, more drastic option: moving service members and families out of Atsugi. "It would not be in the best interest of our alliance" with Japan, Cohen acknowledged in a recent letter to Ambassador Thomas S. Foley. "But my first obligation is to the health of our people. If we cannot eliminate the threat to our people, then we will have no choice but to move our people away from the threat." That strikes a chord with some at Atsugi. "I think that everyone is pretty fed up with hearing what the Japanese government is going to do. What is the U.S. government going to do?" asked Kelly Kibler, speaking at a recent forum with her 17-month old daughter on her lap. Americans have been stationed at Atsugi since the end of World War II, when Gen. Douglas MacArthur landed his troops at the former kamikaze training base. In this most populous part of Japan, Atsugi is one of the few places that provides both the space for landing jets and proximity to the aircraft carrier where they are based. For decades, Japanese neighbors have complained bitterly about the noise and safety hazards that U.S. forces bring. What's unusual at Atsugi is that the Americans abroad are complaining about the threat the foreign environment poses to them. The incinerator sits in a ravine, actually a dry riverbed, with Navy housing on a plateau above. Its three smokestacks are about 90 feet tall but rise only about 25 feet above ground level on the base. In other words, they reach the third floor of the high-rise apartment building. The odd topography makes the smoke plumes bend and flow right across the base -- past the apartments, the base's child-care center and its school. Navy tests since 1988 have shown that the stacks are spewing toxins including dioxin, benzene, lead, arsenic, tetrachloroethylene and formaldehyde. All together, 38 pollutants exceeded the levels set by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. The Navy found an elevated risk of cancer for anyone spending six years at the base. The Japanese government has offered little help. Despite a national groundswell to stop incinerator pollution, many of the nation's prefectures seem slow to move against plants violating environmental regulations. Kanagawa Gov. Hiroshi Okazaki, who previously had dismissed the Navy's claims, recently ordered test samples for the air and soil in the community outside the Navy fence line and sent a letter to Murata advising him to renovate his plant. But on Dec. 3, his government released data showing that tests did not reveal high levels of dioxin. Visit us online to learn more dioxin's health risks and hear from groups who oppose dioxin incinerators.

http://www.postnet.com/postnet/stories.nsf/ByDocID/2BD2B716DF9680018625684D0043B690 Posted: Monday, December 20, 1999 | 6:19 a.m. E-mail this Story to a friend Conditions at Atsugi prompt one woman to send her children to stay in Missouri Phyllis W. Jordan Atsugi Naval Air Facility, Japan - It didn't take Michelle Ashley long to notice the pollution at the air base where the Navy shipped her husband in June 1998. "You sit here on an August day and your eyes burn, your throat tastes like tin and you think, there's only a one in 10,000 chance of getting cancer from this?" she recalled. And it didn't take her long to decide what do with her children the following summer. All three children -- ages 5, 7 and 9 -- spent the summer on her parents' farm in Long Lane, Mo., near Springfield. The airfare cost $5,000, but Ashley doesn't regret it. "My children come first," she said. "They are too important to expose to this sort of thing." The Atsugi base near Tokyo is being steadily polluted by a Japanese incinerator that is spewing dioxin and other dangerous toxins into the air. With aviators and air crew gone as long as eight months a year, the brunt of the incinerator's pollution falls on the families left behind. Residents commonly report rashes, persistent coughs, asthma, migraines and nausea. Medical officials say they cannot definitively tie these ailments to the incinerator's smoke, but those afflicted have little doubt. "There's coincidence and then there's, 'Look at the facts,' " said Lauren Booth, whose entire family was shipped back to the states last year because of her health. "You move there, you get sick. You move away, you get better." Booth said her condition developed within two weeks of arriving at Atsugi: She suffered severe migraine headaches, accompanied by swollen eyes. After 10 months and 12 different medications, the Navy sent her to Balboa Naval Hospital in San Diego. They recommended that she not return to Atsugi. Her husband was pulled off his ship and, within days, the family return to the states. Booth's symptoms disappeared as the family settled in Jacksonville, Fla.