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## Japanese Island Tries to Evade Flight Path

By JAMES BROOKE

**S**HIMOJI SHIMA, Japan, Sept. 17 – Too tiny to appear on most maps, this tropical island of snorkelers and sugar cane farmers, of turquoise waters and red soil flecked with white coral, may appear on the agendas of President Bush and Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi when they meet Tuesday on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly in New York.

Shimoji Shima, population 75 and less than four square miles, has something the militaries of the United States and Japan desperately want: a 10,000-foot concrete runway, about halfway between Okinawa Island and Taiwan. In the 160-mile island chain of the Southern Ryukyus, the runway here is the only one capable of safely handling a fully loaded F-15C fighter jet.

The United States is worried about Chinese saber-rattling over Taiwan and rising sentiment against American bases on Okinawa's main island. In a sign of the times, United States Air Force commanders canceled an air show at Kadena Air Base on Wednesday, and called in the Japanese police on Thursday when protesters started shoving Marine guards the Futenma Marine Corps Air Station.

Japan is worried about a long-running border dispute with China that has left the confines of diplomacy for the open waters of the East China Sea. Six months ago, a boatload of Chinese citizens landed on one of the Senkakus, an island group 125 miles northwest of here claimed by both Japan and China. A Japanese Coast Guard ship arrived, and the protesters were detained and sent back to China.

But the economic prize behind the obscure island dispute came into sharp focus last month as China started laying a 291-mile gas pipeline from Shanghai to Chunxiao, a huge undersea gas reservoir believed to straddle both nations' claims. Without waiting for the dispute to be settled, a Chinese-led international consortium started to build drilling rigs this summer. It intends to extract gas next year from an 8,500-square-mile field estimated to hold up to nine trillion cubic feet, enough to meet all of China's needs for seven years at current consumption rates.

Furious, Shoichi Nakagawa, Japan's minister of economy, trade and industry, flew over the field on June 23 to inspect the Chinese gas complex. Although the Chinese are drilling in uncontested Chinese waters, the Japanese believe that the Chinese will suck up Japanese gas. From Beijing and Tokyo, diplomats have been trading such words as "regrettable" and "provocation."

In this environment, high-level American and Japanese discussions were held in Tokyo this month about

opening Shimoji Shima's civilian airstrip to military use – largely maritime patrols and joint training drills – by American and Japanese pilots.

“There is determination of the top leadership in the Defense Agency to move forward on Shimoji,” said a Washington-based American military expert who talked to principals from both countries. “It would help if Bush would say to Koizumi next week, ‘We really need this, can you make it happen?’ ”

Lance Gatling, an aerospace expert in Tokyo, said, “If you move to Shimoji Shima, you get closer to the Taiwan Straits, which is currently one of the missions in Okinawa.”

A spokeswoman for the Defense Agency said Friday that “there have been no proposals” to allow military use of the strip here. But on Sept. 2, Japanese helicopters, a fighter plane, military ships and 800 soldiers took part in an unprecedented “disaster prevention” exercise on Ishigaki, Shimoji Shima's immediate western neighbor.

But as news of the talks started to leak out, it drew Okinawan opposition. With many Okinawans committed to shifting their economy from military spending to ecological tourism, they voiced opposition to the idea of American warplanes using the strip here, originally built to train Japanese commercial jet pilots.

“I'm shocked and feel a strong sense of crisis,” Akira Ishimine, who heads the regional municipal leaders association, told officials on Wednesday on the nearby island of Miyako. “I will absolutely not let our ports, as well as Shimoji Shima Airport, be used for military purposes.”

On Thursday, Miyako Mainichi, the region's newspaper, carried three articles, including interviews with residents, who held universally negative views of the proposal. Residents worried that their islands could become targets for terrorism or pawns in a conflict with China.



“Okinawan people had an awful experience during the war and are very much sensitive about such a issue,” Yasuto Hamakawa, a taxi driver, said Friday, referring to heavy losses suffered by civilians during World War II. “Their image of the military is directly connected to the war. So I think majority of people here are against such a plan.”

Across Okinawa, the opposition to maintaining a heavy American military presence here has grown. In a survey conducted last weekend by the newspaper Asahi Shimbun, 81 percent of 901 Okinawan voters

surveyed said they did not want military air operations at Futenma here to be shifted to an artificial island to be built about 40 miles away. For many Okinawans, the move should be to Guam or Hawaii.

From one economic point of view, military use of Shimoji Shima would help turn around a regional decline. With young people repelled by the hard work and low pay of fishing and sugar cane farming, the combined populations of Shimoji Shima and its sister island of Irabu have dropped by half during the last quarter-century, to about 6,500 people today. With the population aging and tax collections shrinking, budgets are cut by closing schools and merging towns.

Thirty years ago, when the concrete was laid here, the new airstrip was to bring a new economy: flight training and tourism.

But tourism peaked 15 years ago when 1,000 tourists a month arrived here on direct flights from Okinawa Island. Traffic dwindled, then died in 1995, when the flight was abandoned. Tourism billboards with sun-faded signs now stand in front of an empty lot where the passenger terminal stood until it was destroyed by a typhoon a year ago.

On Thursday afternoon, a few tourists gathered at the head of the runway to watch an apprentice All Nippon Airways pilot go through "touch and go's" at the controls of a Boeing 777. But, since peaking in 1992, use of the strip for training by ANA and Japan Airlines has dropped by 60 percent, as measured in flight hours and landings.

"The amount of training has decreased because the simulators have gotten better," Masatoshi Ando, director of JAL flight training.

But Tokyo's generous subsidies to Okinawa, Japan's poorest prefecture, have taken some of the urgency out of the economic decline. Though the press in Tokyo has been talking about a military threat from China and though this is one of the last stops in Japan before mainland China, people here repeatedly expressed reluctance to get drawn into a superpower confrontation.

"If it is going to attract the attention of the Chinese, I don't want the Self Defense Forces here," a young man running a new beachfront convenience store said, referring to Japan's military. "Our best hope is to reopen the civilian flights."

Nearby, Hideki Taketomi, 41, the manager of a new inn, said: "China understands what the Ryukyus are. We want to avoid a conflict with the people of China. It is best to leave things as they are."