

/ Women's Networks against US Militarism in East Asia.

by Margo Okazawa-Rey

During this fiscal year, the US is spending \$1.26 billion per day on military expenditures for both US and overseas operations. Current direct military conflict is being waged in the Middle East, primarily in Iraq and Afghanistan. Preparing and training for open conflict takes place in East Asia, the "second front" of the current war on Iraq. The presence and operations of US military in East Asia has its roots in unequal power and structural inequalities between race, class, gender, and nation defined and fueled by interrelated systems of globalization and militarism.

U.S. bases in South Korea and Japan date from the end of World War II and currently house over 80,000 U.S. troops who are constantly preparing for war. South Korea is home to 95 US military facilities; 39 facilities are located in Okinawa, the largest facilities adjacent to urban centers where approximately one million people live. And in the Philippines, although its national Senate cancelled a 44-year-old base agreement with the United States in 1991, it ratified a new Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) in 1999 allowing U.S. access to 22 ports on all main islands for refueling, repairs, and R&R – far greater access than before and without the expense of maintaining permanent bases. In their daily lives, women, children and their families in communities near these US bases are confronted by military violence and crimes committed by US servicemen, environmental toxics and threats to the public health, and economic development that privileges the US military at the expense the local well being of host communities and nations. Conditions facing women and children in East Asia are directly linked to women, children and the environment in low-income and communities of color in the US who also often live near military facilities and in the nation where military spending dominates public spending priorities on basic needs as housing, sustaining jobs, health care, and education.

Building a Women's Network Against US Militarism from the Ground Up.

The East Asia-US Women's Network Against Militarism (the Network) formed in May 1997 at our first meeting in Naha, Okinawa a gathering women from Japan, Okinawa, the Philippines, South Korea and the US – survivors of US military violence, activists, academics, and religious leaders. Catalyzed by the 1995 rape of the 12-year old Okinawan girl by three US servicemen, the women came together to discuss shared challenges they face living with presence of US troops and facilities in the US and the strategies they use to transform their local communities from militarized communities into sustainable and safe communities

This meeting was the first time that such a group had been convened to address the issue of long-term US military presence in the region. Although there is discussion about and notice paid to regions where there is active armed conflict, not enough consideration is given to areas where the military presence has fundamentally altered relations there. Here we speak of on-going violence against local women by military personnel; militarized prostitution; abandoned mixed-race children; environmental degradation; and so forth. In fact, at the recent East Asia Beijing +5 prep meeting, the US delegation blocked attempts by Asian women to include long-standing military presence as a problem needing to be addressed.(1)

The goals of the EA-US-PRWN are to:

1. Challenge the principles of "military security" and "national security" on which the US and Asian governments base the massive presence of US military in East Asia through mass public education, lobbying, and community and transnational organizing;
2. Develop the leadership of women and communities directly affected by the actions of military personnel by supporting the work of local NGOs and survivors;
3. Contribute to and strengthen the international solidarity movement that challenges the dominance of the US military specifically and the US government more generally, and the global economic system they promote.

4. Build a movement that challenges all forms of militarism and creates models of women's leadership, community service and development, policy development and planning that replace false notion of national security with genuine forms of human security.

The Network is currently a volunteer-based organization and organized into country groups from Okinawa, mainland Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, Puerto Rico/Vieques, and the U.S. Two women from each country group currently serve as the planning committee to play for bi-annual gatherings. The core group of the US country group is comprised of 8 women, the majority of whom are women of color and immigrants (Japanese-American, Filipino American, Japanese, British, Japanese/African American, Chinese American, Okinawan).

Activities and Accomplishments

To date, the Network has functioned off of mostly volunteer and in-kind staff to focus on its key activity – a bi-annual gathering of our Network. Each meeting is called by a host country group which use the international meeting as a way to strengthen and raise visibility of their local organizing work. To date we have held 4 meetings. The first in 1997 in Okinawa hosted by Okinawa Women Act Against Military Violence, a coalition of women from throughout the Okinawa prefecture representing teachers, labor leaders, elected officials, social workers, and youth. The following year we reconvened in Washington DC to conduct a set of meetings with US congressional delegates, the Justice Department, Department of Defense. US women hosted the gathering as a way to raise visibility of women's issues in East Asia and to strategically develop relationships with DC based national advocacy organizations. In 2000 we met in Okinawa again to build the strength of local organizing for the convening of the G-8 summit. In 2002 we met in Seoul, South Korea hosted by SAFE Korea a coalition of women's organizations who formed their organization to plan for and host the Network meeting. SAFE Korea now functions as the lead women's peace and justice organization in South Korea.

In early 2000 we expanded the Network to include women from Puerto Rico and Vieques as a way to 1) understand the colonial relationship between the US and Puerto Rico; 2) deepen understanding of federal policies related to US military training; 3) link the anti-military and peace organizing in Vieques to the local organizing in base towns of Okinawa, South Korea, Japan, and the Philippines; 4) strengthen the local work in Vieques by building the international solidarity presence from East Asia. Building on our bi-annual gatherings, the Network members participate in various educational and advocacy arenas at the local, state, national and international levels adding a critical, yet often not included, perspective of the impacts of US militarism on women, children and the environment in Puerto Rico and East Asia. We have succeeded in building a Network of nearly 100 women across five nations who have become active members. Recognizing the important political work of interpreters and translators we successfully developed a communications and interpretation program that connects us across 5 languages: Japanese, Tagalog, Spanish, Korean, and English. We are currently in the process of developing a feminist glossary of terms and concepts that we have had to discuss, understand, and agree upon as a shared language for the Network. We are also planning for our next bi-annual gathering to be held in the Philippines in Fall 2004.

In the next year, the Network will undertake a series of strategic discussions that will clarify and solidify overall Network strategies as well as country group strategies. When we established the Network in 1997, we did not foresee the events and aftermath of 9-11. It has become clear that Network growth, relevancy and effectiveness will depend on our ability to expand and deepen our Network with additional women, allied organizations, and to join our women's organizing and network building with other movements in order to build the influence and power needed to shift the US military policy and public spending priorities. We are currently working together as a Network and as individual country groups to develop strategies from discussions of key questions as: 1) How to connect local organizing to a global movement; 2) How to develop a shared understanding of the issues of US militarism and their root causes; 3) How to develop women's leadership that recognizes the structural inequalities of race, class, national privilege that separate women in global struggles; and 4) How to strengthen organizational vehicles for women to come together across national boundaries, and the embedded

structural inequalities to share stories and experiences and to develop a genuinely feminist transnational praxis that ultimately contribute to and lead movements for global peace and justice?

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(1) Personal communication with Suzuyo Takazato, 26 February 2000