

March 22, 2013

Japanese Leader Seeks to Restart Stalled Plan to Move Okinawan Base

By **MARTIN FACKLER**

TOKYO — Seeking to remove a longstanding irritant in Japan’s ties with the United States, Prime Minister [Shinzo Abe](#) said on Friday that his government would ask local officials on the island of Okinawa for a key permit to begin construction to relocate an unpopular American air base.

The decision to request the land reclamation permit is an effort by Mr. Abe’s government to restart a long-stalled plan to move the American base, Marine Corps Air Station Futenma, to a less crowded part of the island. [Last month in Washington](#), Mr. Abe and President Obama agreed to proceed with the relocation plan, which was originally approved in 1996 but has been blocked because of Okinawan opposition.

That opposition appears as stiff as ever, making it uncertain that the island’s prefectural government will approve the permit. While the island’s governor, Hirokazu Nakaima, is a member of Mr. Abe’s Liberal Democratic Party, he is under intense public pressure to oppose the relocation.

“I cannot understand it; this is impossible” to approve, Mr. Nakaima said of the government’s decision to seek the construction permit.

For many Okinawans, the Futenma base has become a symbol of an overly onerous American military presence on an island that is home to more than half of the 50,000 United States military employees in Japan. Okinawan frustration turned to anger three years ago, when the prime minister at the time, Yukio Hatoyama, vowed to move the busy helicopter base off the island but [renege](#)d.

For Mr. Abe, whose conservative Liberal Democrats swept to power in December, progress on the Futenma issue would be a big step toward fulfilling campaign promises to mend relations with the United States, Japan’s traditional protector. For many Japanese, the American military presence on Okinawa has taken on a new significance since last summer, when their nation became embroiled with China in a tense standoff over disputed islands in the nearby East China Sea.

The governor will now have up to a year to decide whether to approve the permit, which could give Mr. Abe time to try to buy Okinawan acceptance with offers of generous financial support, as Tokyo has done in the past. In a nod to the depth of local opposition, Mr. Abe on Friday promised to do everything in his power to reduce the base burden on Okinawa. Japanese officials have said this could mean speeding up a plan to move 9,000 Marines from Okinawa to other spots in the Asia-Pacific region, and return some base land to Okinawan authorities.

Still, the decision to try to restart the deal carries political risks for Mr. Abe, who could find himself thwarted by Okinawan opposition. It is unclear if his government has the political will to force the island to allow construction, especially if that spurs Okinawans to stage sit-ins or other acts of civil disobedience.

At the same time, Mr. Abe said on Friday, allowing the base to remain in its current location is “impermissible.” That is also the official position of the United States government, which wants to move Futenma and its aircraft from their current location in the center of the crowded city of Ginowan, in southern Okinawa, to Camp Schwab, an existing Marine base on the island’s jungle-covered northern end.

“I don’t think it will be easy,” Mr. Abe said of getting permission to start base construction. “We need to proceed while rebuilding a relationship of trust” with Okinawans.

The land-reclamation permit is a necessary administrative step needed before work can begin on filling in parts of the coral-filled sea off Camp Schwab for the new base’s twin runways. The landfill plans are also fiercely opposed by many Okinawans, who say they would damage the island’s fragile ecosystem, and particularly the feeding grounds of the dugong, a large, manateelike marine mammal.