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Nago Mayor Inamine leading Okinawa anti-base group to Washington

By Eric Johnston

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TOKYO — Nago Mayor Susumu Inamine will lead a delegation of Okinawa residents and politicians to Washington on Thursday, as tensions rise between the mayor and the central government over the plan to build a U.S. military replacement base in the city's Henoko district.

The central government is thinking of bringing the start of construction forward from next spring to this autumn. Inamine told reporters Monday that Nago is still reviewing the Okinawa Defense Bureau's request to use Henoko Bay in the project.

"I can't believe they would progress with construction. It's impossible," Inamine said.

In early April, Defense Minister Itsunori Onodera told U.S. Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel that to satisfy Okinawan demands, Tokyo was looking at ways to begin construction of the Henoko replacement facility for U.S. Marine Corps Air Station Futenma by the end of the year. Okinawa Gov. Hirokazu Nakaima is demanding the contentious air base be closed within five years.

The Okinawa Defense Bureau's application to the city included a request for base construction-related approval. The bureau also asked Nago to determine whether Henoko Bay possesses any cultural properties, and for a variety of environmental impact studies in and around Henoko.

Nago has already identified seven locations that have historical ruins but says more investigation is necessary to determine whether any cultural properties are present.

Inamine, a staunch opponent of relocating Futenma to Henoko, will spend a week in the U.S., spreading his message in New York and Washington. He will speak with American academics, policy experts, current and former politicians, and American NGOs who also oppose the Henoko plan. His schedule includes meetings at the Brookings Institution, the Congressional Research Service and the libertarian Cato Institute, as well as with former Sen. Jim Webb, who led congressional opposition to the Henoko plan until he retired from politics in 2012. A wrapup news conference is also planned.

The trip to drum up support in the U.S., especially in Congress, for stopping the Henoko plan from going forward comes amid rising pressure from Tokyo on the anti-base mayor and as Nago and Okinawa prepare for two critical base-related elections this autumn.

Elections for the Nago Municipal Assembly, which opposes the base plan by a slim majority, are expected to take place in September.

The Okinawa governor's election is scheduled for November.