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Convener, Concerned Citizens of Akita on Aegis Ashore Missile Base

Let me take this opportunity to thank all of you for your warm support for our protest against the plan to deploy the Aegis Ballistic Missile Defense System in Akita. Defense Minister Kono announced on June 25 that he would give up the deployment plan. Honestly, at the year-end of 2017 when we first learned about the plan, we thought that it would not be possible to reverse the military planning of the government. At the time, many of the people in Akita had no idea about the “land-based interceptor missiles” or “Aegis Ashore”.

As we learned of the issue through invited lecturers from Tokyo and Akita, we came to know that the proposed military facility would operate around the clock with the purpose of intercepting missiles fired by North Korea.

The Self Defense Forces' Araya Training Field, a candidate location for the deployment, borders on Katsuhira District which has a population of 13,000. Kindergartens, primary schools and high schools are located there. The prefectural and city offices and hospitals are also located within a 3 kilometer radius and National Route 7 runs through the area. People began to question why a missile base was to be built adjacent to residential areas. Anxiety grew over the possible impact of electromagnetic waves emanating from the base around the clock on the health and living of the local people. People were more and more concerned about the possibility of the Aegis Ashore base becoming a prime target of enemies and were afraid of a nuclear exchange over their heads. It was also revealed that Akita and Yamaguchi (another candidate prefecture for the deployment) were situated on the shortest paths connecting North Korea and the US Indo-Pacific Command in Hawaii, and North Korea and Andersen USAF Base in Guam. They would serve as virtual shields to protect the U.S. But the Ministry of Defense never gave clear answers to questions raised by the local people.

In June 2019, some officials of the Ministry of Defense visited Akita to present a report

to the local people on the suitability of Araya District for their plan. Although local newspaper Sakigake pointed out beforehand the slapdash nature of the data used in the report, the Ministry held the meeting as planned. During the meeting one official was found to be dozing off. This invited strong criticism and distrust from the people against the Ministry of Defense. Further, the victory of a candidate of united opposition parties against Aegis Ashore in the House of Councilors' election (July 2019) strongly impacted public opinion in Akita.

This change was made possible not by a blunder on the side of the Defense Ministry. While learning about the Aegis project, we worked on a petition to the Diet, held standing appeals in many places, spread the anti-Aegis appeal among people in Akita prefecture and held repeated dialogues with elected officials of every level. As a result, 24 out of 25 local authorities expressed their opposition to the plan, which further encouraged local people to express their opposition through statements issued by citizens' organizations and circles. We also repeated on-site investigations around the proposed site. Especially, the opposition expressed by the Araya-Katsuhira District Coalition, made up of 16 town neighborhood associations, stimulated other associations. The article published by the president of Sakigake newspaper, which asked, "Can we protect our future by weapons?" gave great encouragement to the people of Akita.

Pushed by public opinion in the prefecture, the Governor of Akita and Mayor of Akita City, who so far had declined to speak clearly on the issue, and even the LDP Diet members of Akita said, "It is not possible to proceed with the project in Araya."

The government responded, "Defense is the sole prerogative of the government". We countered such an attack saying, "The role of the government should be to protect people's right to live in peace." The people's movement, based on a variety of demands, such as "We don't want the Aegis base in our neighborhood" and "Public money should be used to fight the pandemic", enabled us to change the defense policy of the State. Building on our success, we want to achieve a government which will join the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons.