

PM: A Tale of Two Islands: Iceland and Okinawa

By Polly Mann

The little island country of Iceland (population 323,000) has been of interest to me for many years. Of all the Scandinavian countries, I consider it the most progressive. In the fall of last year, the Reykjavik City Council voted to join the Boycott, Divestment and Sanction (BDS) movement based on the South African model which calls on nations to pressure Israel to end its brutal racist, apartheid policies against Palestinians by boycotting Israeli products, divesting in funds invested in that country, and leveling sanctions against all activities involving those policies. Reykjavik was responding, in particular, to the 2014 Israeli military massacre of Palestinians trapped in the occupied territory of the Gaza Strip, which had been under siege for eight years. (The massacre by the Israeli military, which the U.S. supplies with weapons, resulted in the death of 2,251 dead, the injury of 11,231, two-thirds of them seriously, including 3,436 children, one-tenth of which will be left with permanent injuries.) A couple of days after it agreed to participate in the BDS movement, Reykjavik, succumbing to pressure, narrowed its boycott to Israeli goods made in the Occupied (illegally) Territories; this is where Israeli settlers persecute Palestinians, poison their wells, burn their olive orchards, and confiscate or bulldoze their homes to build their own settlements. The limited boycott isn't as strong as it would have been, but it is more than Minneapolis or Chicago or other city councils in the U.S. have managed to do.



Gate 1 of Camp Schwab in Okinawa.

Photo: xrea.com

When banks were in trouble in 2008, the United States bailed them out. But Iceland has sentenced to prison 26 bankers whom it held responsible for the 2008 global

financial crisis. This is in contrast to this country, where during the first 15 months of 2015 federal prosecution of white collar crime fell to a 20-year low.



A dugong.

Photo: Julien Willem/CC

Another island, Okinawa (population 1,312,000), a prefecture of Japan, is in conflict with the United States, which is constructing Camp Schwab, a U.S. Marine air base, there in Henoko. The present governor, Takeshi Onaga, promised the people of Okinawa that he would revoke the permit for the new construction. In Tokyo, however, the central government vowed to fight the governor's decision. But according to a recent Washington Post article "many Okinawans are fed up with bearing the overwhelming burden of Japan's military alliance with the United States." Okinawa makes up less than 1 percent of the country's land mass but houses 75 percent of the U.S. military bases in Japan. There is an ongoing campaign against the base. Opponents are angered by the tremendous noise and the threat to public safety generated by yet another base. The Marine air base would also cause irreparable damage to the marine ecosystem, which is home to one of the world's few dugong, large sea mammals related to the manatee. There are 32 U.S. military bases located on Okinawa Island. In total, these bases occupy approximately 20 percent of the island's area.

Okinawans won't accept it, and opposition is growing and aided by an emerging inter-island, international Pivot for Peace movement. In December, a delegation of U.S. Veterans for Peace, joined local anti-base activists in solidarity at the gate where the new Camp Schwab is being constructed in Henoko, raising banners that said, "No New U.S. Military Base on Henoko," "Close Futenma Air Station," and "No Helipads at Takae." Locals, and later foreigners were forcibly removed by police, enabling cement trucks to move onto the base, but according to reports there was no active construction on the base that day.

Polly Mann is a co-founder of Women Against Military Madness and regular contributor and columnist for the WAMM newsletter. Mary Beaudoin contributed information about the Veterans for Peace in Okinawa.