

NEWS WRAP

AGD

Nago, a small Okinawan town, with a population of 60,000, at Okinawa island's underdeveloped north, is against relocating a US troops base to Nago, from a larger city nearby. The results of the local vote elections in the second half of Jan 10, where Mr Susumu Inamine of the Democratic Party has been elected mayor, indicates misgivings over the 2006 agreement, between USA and Japan, by which the US Marines base at Futenma airfield was to be shifted to Nago. More than half of the 50,000 United States military personnel in Japan are located in Okinawa. The move to Nago would create excessive environmental damage, and impose additional unfair burdens on Okinawa. The plans for the military base at Nago, involves construction of two runways partly on landfill, which juts into coral filled waters near Henko, a small fishing village, which is administered by Nago. Washington considers its military plans for troops realignment in the region as fundamental.

There has been a growing diplomatic rift between USA and Japan, its closest ally, over the fate of the military deal. While the Obama administration has been pressing Japan to honour the deal, Japan's new prime minister, Yukio Hatoyama wants to completely re-examine its accord with the United States. Few other Japanese communities are willing to have a US base installed, with noisy helicopters on their native soil. While Japan's post-war military base strategy is being re-examined in Japan, the Obama administration is resisting merging the Marine base with a nearby US Air Force base or shifting it to Guam.

CONTAMINATED FOOD

Melamine, the industrial compound at the centre of a tainted food scandal that rocked China's dairy industry in 2008, has again been noticed by health officials in frozen confectionaries and other dairy products in Guizhou province of China. Contaminated food articles have been swept off local store shelves. Despite a nationwide outrage and a Chinese government crackdown after the 2008 events, some producers in China are still selling tainted food ingredients. Certain Chinese officials had failed to monitor a large batch of melamine-tainted products in Jan 10. Food companies from Shanghai and Hebei, Liaoning and Shandong provinces had produced the tainted products in March 09 and April 09. In defence, the company officials explain that the melamine was in milk powder, which was purchased elsewhere, as ingredients in their products. Three companies have been banned from selling the products in Guizhou. Melamine, commonly used in plastics and fertilizer, and other products, has a high nitrogen content. This makes food appear to be protein-rich in standard nutrition tests. The melamine chemical can cause kidney stones and kidney failure, when consumed.

HORRIFIC STILL

Health officials in Haiti are faced with a daunting crisis. The Jan 10 earthquake created huge devastation. Thousands of Haitians need rehabilitation for a range of injuries, from broken hips and legs to nervo-logical disorders from head

injuries. Trauma patients are ready to leave the hospitals, but lack homes or families to return. Many of the injured require prosthetic limbs, frequent wound cleanings, bandage changes, and several months of rehabilitation. With earthquake aftershocks rattling Port-au-Prince, many injured victims are afraid to be inside the hospitals, but also unwilling to leave the hospital premises where access to food, water and care are available.

GM CROPS

During the Green Revolution agricultural growth (1975-85) in Punjab, and neighbouring Haryana, Rajasthan and western Uttar Pradesh, fertilizers and pesticides poisoned the farm lands. The chemical poisons seeped into the underground water, and caused widespread cancer and other diseases. Genetically modified Bt cotton failed in Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh. The modified crops led to severe debts, in the process of raising the crop. Between 1997 to 2007, nearly two lac farmers in Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh committed suicide. The genetically modified (GM) seeds are not resistant to pests. GM seeds are destroyed by Bt resistant pests, like bollworm and Round-up tolerant super-weeds, which grow world wide. The GM seeds are more expensive than traditional organic seeds, and are available in lesser quantity. The standing GM crops produce sterile seeds, which cannot be utilized for next year's crop, as in traditional farming. The farmer is compelled to become dependent upon companies for GM seed for an indefinite period of time. The farmer depending on companies supplying GM seeds, ensures corporate profits, over a long period of time. The trend could bring entire Indian agriculture under bondage of a few firms, in western industrialized countries, who manufacture GM seeds.

Harvesting of GM crops is not guaranteed. GM crops require double or triple the quantity of water needed by traditional seeds, and they can fail when faced with water shortage. They also require fertilizers. Land on which GM crops are cultivated, can only accept GM seeds, thereafter. After three or four harvests of GM crops, the land becomes barren. There is a 'suicide gene' in the Monsanto seeds, which can jeopardize the entire food chain, as it spreads to other plants, and inhibits their natural reproduction. Besides crop genocide, the GM crops could be unfit for human consumption. The toxic compounds in the GM crops, which destroy pests, could be retained in the crop, causing health hazards in the human body. There is evidence that a few years earlier, four animals died after eating Bt cotton stalks. India has a rich bio-diversity and agro-climate range, which ensures the production of fresh vegetables and fruit throughout the year. Bt crops point to wide potential health hazards in bio-engineered food. Animals who have consumed GM food have displayed problems with growth, organ development and immune responsiveness. Bt crops have led to ill health and allergies, on farm and factory workers in Madhya Pradesh. Farm labourers in Gujarat have also suffered. India's Genetic Engineering Approval Committee hastily approved Bt brinjal for environmental release in Oct 09, without conducting adequate tests. There are grave allegations of the GEAC being in collusion with the industry lobby, as the bio-safety study of Bt brinjal was done by

Monsanta, the company which produced the seeds, and is also marketing the GM seeds.

Severe opposition by NGOs and a number of state governments has led to the union government of India to suspend the commercial release of Bt brinjal, which was destined to be the first genetically modified food crop in India. □□□