

# THE Nation.

## Living at the 'Tip of the Spear'

*By KOOHAN PAIK*

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I was born in Pasadena in 1961 but raised in South Korea and other Pacific Rim locales, finally settling in Hawaii. During my coming-of-age years, between 1971 and 1982, my family lived on a beautiful small island in the western Pacific: lush jungles, remote waterfalls and mysterious freshwater caves. I remember riding horses through abandoned coconut groves and balmy nighttime spearfishing in some of the most abundant reefs in the world.

That place was Guam, at the southern tip of the Northern Mariana Islands, a US colony. Many people think of Guam only as a giant military base, the nexus of US forward operations in the Pacific islands--"the tip of the spear," as the Pentagon calls it. That has certainly become its primary fate. The base occupies fully a third of the island and is off-limits to civilians, including the indigenous Chamorro people, who claim the oldest civilization in the Pacific. Even during my childhood, though I barely noticed it at the time, there was the constant background drone of B-52s roaring overhead to and from Vietnam, and submarines cruising the coasts. Such is the island's current trauma, after an agonized history that has included repeated invasions and four occupations of varying degrees of brutality over four centuries--by Spain, Japan and twice by the United States.

Despite these serial humiliations, the Chamorros--a unique mélange of Micronesian, Spanish and Asian bloodlines--have always maintained optimism, courage and a resilient sense of humor. So far, they have successfully navigated their delicate existence as traditional peoples on a Pacific island, while also trying to play supportive roles--as nonvoting "citizens" in a US colony, even patriotic active soldiers--for their current master. But now they're going to need all the resiliency they can muster to deal with the next blow the United States has in store.

I returned to Guam for a month-long visit with old friends this past November. I was stunned to find the forests of my childhood being replaced by tarmac at an alarming rate; the remaining wild beaches and valleys being surveyed as

potential live-fire shooting ranges; and an enormous, magnificently rich coral reef slated for dredging in order to build a port for the Navy's largest aircraft carrier. I witnessed the rage and hurt, exploding suddenly--and so unexpectedly--from the Chamorro people and other island residents, who have had no say in the planning of cataclysmic changes that will turn their homeland into an overcrowded waste dump for the creation of the hemisphere's pre-eminent military fortress. My friends told me it's all part of what's called the Guam Buildup.

Though technically Americans, people born in Guam have few American rights if they choose to live in their homeland. They can't vote for president; they have only one, nonvoting representative in Congress, and Congress can overturn any law passed by Guam's legislature. The island remains one of only sixteen UN-designated "non-self-governing territories"--in other words, colonies. As such, its people have no legal route to appeal any decisions made in Washington. A burgeoning resistance movement is under way, which the military is well aware of. They have hopes that a visit by President Obama, twice postponed and now set for June, will help ease the growing agitation. Given the mood of the people, I doubt Obama can calm anything.

The upcoming changes are all aimed at fulfilling a Pentagon vision set forth in its 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review. The "Guam Buildup [will] transform Guam," says the report, "the westernmost sovereign [*sic*] territory of the United States, into a hub for security activities in the region," intended to "deter and defeat" regional aggressors. Guam will be ground zero for mega-militarization in the Pacific and beyond. John Pike of [Globalsecurity.org](http://Globalsecurity.org), a Washington-based think tank, hypothesizes that the military's goal is to be able "to run the planet from Guam and Diego Garcia [an Indian Ocean atoll owned by Britain] by 2015," "even if the entire Eastern Hemisphere has drop-kicked" the United States from every other base on their territory.

The swell of US military activity in the Pacific is not confined to Guam. All across the hemisphere, island communities are inflamed over a quiet, swift rearrangement and expansion of US bases throughout the Pacific--on Okinawa (Japan); on Jeju (a joint US-South Korea effort); on Tinian (in the same archipelago as Guam, but part of the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands); on Kwajalein and the rest of Micronesia; and on the Hawaiian islands of Oahu, Big Island and Kauai. The US Pacific Command calls it an Integrated Global Presence and Basing Strategy. These imperial intentions have barely registered in the American media, despite gargantuan expenditures and plans. Nonetheless, this projection of American colonial assumptions and aggression is taking its toll throughout the Pacific Rim.

The centerpiece of the Guam Buildup is the transfer of about 8,600 marines from Okinawa. When you add their families and construction teams, including entire low-wage crews from the Philippines and Micronesia--there goes the "jobs bonanza" locals were promised--the expected influx will be 80,000 more people on Guam. The island, about half the size of Cape Cod, has a population of about 178,000. The people of Guam, whose largest ethnic group are Chamorro (37 percent of the population), followed by Filipino (25 percent) and then statesiders

(10 percent), doubt their island has the carrying capacity to absorb a 50 percent population surge.

In November the Defense Department released a mandatory Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) assessing the buildup's effects. It elicited the most blistering responses ever to come from the Environmental Protection Agency, newly resuscitated after the Bush years. The EPA gave the DEIS its lowest possible ranking for proposing entirely ineffective mitigation actions. The agency further enumerated a litany of ecological catastrophes. Hundreds of acres of jungle and wetlands habitat will be covered with concrete and tract developments in order to house tens of thousands of newcomers. There will be massive raw-sewage spills and a shortage of drinking water. The Navy's plans include the destruction of seventy-one acres of an exquisitely healthy coral reef, home to at least 110 unique coral species, in order to build a berth for a nuclear-powered aircraft carrier, which transports eighty-five fighter jets and 5,600 people.

Meanwhile, the Army wants to turn a pristine limestone forest that stretches from the hills to the sea--site of a prehistoric village that is listed with the National Registry of Historic Places--into a shooting range. In addition, it wants to build ammunition storage bunkers in wetlands areas. The Air Force hopes to build a missile defense shield, as well as hangars, airstrips and helicopter pads, turning Guam into the planet's premier parking lot for billion-dollar fighter jets, helicopters and drones.

The DEIS provided no adequate alternative actions to any of these problems. Nor did it mention that dredging the reef will dislodge radioactive sediment that accumulated during the 1960s and '70s when ships traveling from atomic test sites in the Marshall Islands came to Guam to be washed down at Apra Harbor.

The DEIS was written as if Guam's people, land and culture counted for nothing. The vice speaker of the Guam legislature, Benjamin Cruz, charged that the "problem you had with the original DEIS is that it was done virtually." Cruz pointed out that the report, prepared at a staggering cost of \$87 million, was written by consultants who had never been to Guam and who had simply cobbled together the 11,000-page document based on Internet research and phone calls to Guam government agencies.

The EPA's excoriating response to the DEIS has prompted lawmakers to question not only the cost of the buildup but also the costs of mitigating the project's environmental, social and cultural impacts. The governor of Guam estimates that \$3 billion will be needed to upgrade infrastructure before any military construction begins. Military construction is already priced at more than \$10 billion, assuming that Japan fulfills its promise to kick in \$6 billion to help remove US troops from Okinawa. If Japan begs off, the price tag for US taxpayers will soar to more than \$13 billion. Surprisingly, Republican Senator Kay Bailey Hutchinson of Texas sharply criticized Pentagon officials at a Senate appropriations hearing in March about the unexpected exorbitant costs of current Asia-Pacific basing strategies. She suggested that the best solution might be permanent bases on the US mainland, "where you don't have training constraints

and you don't have urban buildup, and it is a more stable environment for our families."

By contrast, Democratic Senator Jim Webb of Virginia, who has advocated for an increased military presence in the Marianas since the 1970s, is intent on seeing the buildup through. He supports two solutions: pouring billions into massive infrastructure development (highways, waste facilities, power plants, etc.) and moving all the live-fire training to the gemlike island of nearby Tinian. However, many Guam residents feel that infrastructure spending misses the true cultural and environmental dangers of the population spike; and on Tinian, local farmers, who would be forced off their land (à la Bikini Atoll, circa 1946), are aghast that live-fire training would mark the end of agrarian culture there.

The incident that set these plans for the Guam Buildup in motion was the 1995 gang-rape of a 12-year-old girl by US marines stationed at the Futenma Air Base in Okinawa, one of several shocking incidents involving assaults on local girls by marines. Outraged residents pressured the conservative government to reduce or eliminate the American military presence in Japan. Protests culminated in a 2006 realignment agreement between Japan and the Bush administration to close the air base and send half of its troops to a new air base on Henoko Bay, on Okinawa's east coast, with the other half going to Guam by 2014.

But fierce resistance in Okinawa has derailed the move. Japan's new prime minister, Yukio Hatoyama, who was swept into power in September on his promise to reduce the number of US troops, caught military planners off guard by refusing to allow base construction at Henoko. In October, Hatoyama incensed Defense Secretary Robert Gates by putting the Marines' move on hold until he determines an alternative to the Henoko site. The relocation of Futenma remains stalemated.

The people of Guam have never before opposed military plans for their island. In fact, the Chamorros and Filipinos from Guam are arguably the most patriotic people in the nation; more soldiers from the Marianas have fought and died in American wars since 1950, per capita, than those from any other region in the country. However, the sheer magnitude of destruction proposed by the Guam Buildup is unprecedented and has pushed these patriots to their limit. For the first time in the island's history, they are uncharacteristically speaking out against the military. At a recent public hearing, Chamorro veteran soldier Janet Aguon, who fought in two wars, said, "I'm truly sick and tired of the United States of America and the Department of Defense treating the people of Guam as if they were trash. So my message to President Obama, the DoD, the secretary of the Navy: take the military and put them in your own country and not on our tiny little island."

Military planners are worried. The Hawaii-based commander of Marine forces in the Pacific, Lt. Gen. Keith Stalder, told the *Washington Post* in March, "I see a rising level of concern about how we are going to manage this."

Meanwhile, demilitarization activists have begun networking. The goal: *a Pacific for the people*. Those from Guam are allying themselves not only with those from

Tinian and other Mariana Islands but also with all their Pacific Rim cousins, particularly on Okinawa, in Hawaii and on Jeju Island. These three locations, with Guam, will be sites for the nation's most advanced missile technology--the ultimate geopolitical "Kick Me" sign. As an example of this pan-Pacific concordance, retired Col. Ann Wright recently joined Pacific Islanders outside the gates of Pacific Command Headquarters on Oahu to protest the Guam Buildup.

"We want Admiral Willard [head of the Pacific Command] to hear this: No means No!" said Wright. "When you force yourself on someone against their will, it's called rape--rape of the people, the culture and the land. We Americans must stop our government's military expansion in the Pacific."

Carmen Artero Kasperbauer, a Chamorro elder whose family's land is now part of an air base, told the military daily *Stars and Stripes*, "We hate being possessions to the federal government. That's why people are angry." But Kasperbauer, like most Chamorros, doesn't direct her anger at the troops. "I'm not talking about the uniformed military. We love the uniformed military. Our son...helped liberate the Kuwaitis. But he can't help liberate me."

Increasingly, Guam residents are discussing the urgency of political self-determination. "We're being moved back and forth across a chessboard by two countries: one that once occupied us [Japan] and one that currently does," pointed out university instructor Desiree Ventura, author of the popular blog *The Drowning Mermaid*. Clearly, the need for sovereignty is more dire than ever, exposing the real question at hand: is President Obama ready to release Guam's people from their colonized status?

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