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On Guam, planned Marine base raises anger, infrastructure concerns

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HAGATNA, GUAM -- This remote Pacific island is home to U.S. citizens who are fervent supporters of the military, as measured by their record of fighting and dying in America's recent wars.

But they are angry about a major military buildup here, which the government of Guam and many residents say is being grossly underfunded. They fear that the construction of a new Marine Corps base will overwhelm the island's already inadequate water and sewage systems, as well as its port, power grid, hospital, highways and social services.

"Our nation knows how to find us when it comes to war and fighting for war," said Michael W. Cruz, lieutenant governor of Guam and an Army National Guard colonel who recently returned from a four-month tour as a surgeon in Afghanistan. "But when it comes to war preparations -- which is what the military buildup essentially is -- nobody seems to know where Guam is."

The federal government has given powerful reasons to worry to the 180,000 residents of Guam, a balmy tropical island whose military importance derives from its location as by far the closest U.S. territory to China and North Korea.

The Environmental Protection Agency said last month that the military buildup, as described in Pentagon documents, could trigger island-wide water shortages that would "fall disproportionately on a low income medically underserved population." It also said the buildup would overload sewage-treatment systems in a way that "may result in significant adverse public health impacts."

A report by the Government Accountability Office last year came to similar conclusions, saying the buildup would "substantially" tax Guam's infrastructure.

President Obama had planned to visit Guam on Monday as the brief first stop of an Asia trip, but he delayed his travel because of Sunday's health-care vote in the House. Obama is aware of the problems here and had planned to promise some federal help,

White House officials said.

"We're trying to identify and understand the current conditions on Guam and the potential impact of the relocation," said Nancy Sutley, head of the White House Council on Environmental Quality, who on Tuesday will lead a delegation to the island. "There's no question that the environmental conditions on Guam are not ideal."

Besides a new Marine base and airfield, the buildup includes port dredging for a nuclear-powered aircraft carrier, a project that would cause what the EPA describes as an "unacceptable" impact on 71 acres of a vibrant coral reef. The military, which owns 27 percent of the island, also wants to build a Marine firing range on land that includes one of the last undeveloped beachfront forests on Guam.

'Should not proceed'

In a highly unusual move, the EPA graded the buildup plan as "environmentally unsatisfactory" and said it "should not proceed as proposed."

"The government of Guam and the Guam Waterworks cannot by themselves accommodate the military expansion," said Nancy Woo, associate director of the EPA's western regional water division. She said Guam would need about \$550 million to upgrade its water and sewage systems. White House officials said the EPA findings are preliminary.

Guam government officials put the total direct and indirect costs of coping with the buildup at about \$3 billion, including \$1.7 billion to improve roads and \$100 million to expand the already overburdened public hospital. On this island -- where a third of the population receives food stamps and about 25 percent lives below the U.S. poverty level -- that price tag cannot be paid with local tax revenue.

"It is not possible and it is not fair that the island bear the cost," Woo said.

At the peak of construction, the buildup would increase Guam's population by 79,000 people, or about 45 percent. The EPA said the military plans, so far, to pay for public services for about 23,000 of the new arrivals, mostly Marines and their dependents who are relocating from the Japanese island of Okinawa. Ceded to the United States by Spain in 1898, Guam is a U.S. territory. Its residents are American citizens, but they cannot vote in presidential elections and have no voting representative in Congress.

The Marine Corps is sensing a populist backlash on Guam, which is three times the size of the District of Columbia and more than 6,000 miles west of Los Angeles.

"I see a rising level of concern about how we are going to manage this," Lt. Gen. Keith J. Stalder, the Hawaii-based commander of Marine forces in the Pacific, said in a telephone interview. "I think it is becoming clearer every day that they need outside assistance."

The White House said Obama included \$750 million in his budget to address the civilian impact of the relocation and has asked Congress for \$1 billion next year, but Guam officials say they have received no assurances from the federal government that the

money is headed their way.

No input in decision

Guam was not consulted in the decision to move 8,000 Marines -- about half those based in Okinawa -- to the island. The \$13 billion move was negotiated in 2006 between the Bush administration and a previous Japanese government, with Japan paying about \$6 billion of the non-civilian cost, as a way of reducing the large U.S. military footprint in Okinawa.

But in the past year, with new leadership in Tokyo, the Japanese role in the move has become complicated. Anti-military sentiment is growing in Okinawa; Japan's new leaders have yet to decide if they will allow a Marine air station to remain anywhere in the country. Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates has expressed irritation with Japan, even as the Pentagon presses ahead with its plan to shift the Marines to Guam by 2014.

The government of Guam and most of its residents initially welcomed the buildup. It was viewed as good for business, and the military enjoys deep respect here. Many families have members serving in the armed forces; among the 50 states and four territories, this island regularly ranks first in recruiting success. Guam's killed-in-action rate is about four times as high as on the mainland.

Guam is the only American soil with a sizable population to have been occupied by a foreign military power. During World War II, the Japanese held the island for 2 1/2 brutal years, building concentration camps and forcing the indigenous Chamorro people to provide slave labor and sex. Beheadings were common.

Led by the Marines, American forces liberated the island in 1944, and people here say they still feel a debt to the United States. To repay it, they proudly call their island the "tip of the spear" for projecting U.S. military power in the Far East. Guam already has Navy and Air Force bases that can handle many of the most potent weapons in the U.S. arsenal. Nuclear-powered attack submarines, F-22 fighter jets and B-2 stealth bombers frequent the island, which will soon be protected by its own anti-missile system.

"We don't mind being the tip of spear, but we don't want to get the shaft," said Simon A. Sanchez II, chairman of Guam's commission on public utilities. "We have been asking for help from Day One, but we have not got any meaningful appropriations."

'Not being listened to'

The governor of Guam, Felix Camacho, asked the military last month to slow down the deployment of Marines until sufficient federal money arrives. But as a territory, and without a vote in Congress, the island has negligible lobbying power and no legal means of halting the buildup.

Many residents have hoped that Obama -- a fellow Pacific islander, who was born in Hawaii and lived in Indonesia -- might understand their anxieties and unlock federal resources. The White House said Obama will visit Guam when his Asia trip is rescheduled, perhaps in June.

"I just want to remind President Obama that his story is our story," said Victoria-Lola Leon Guerrero, an English instructor at the University of Guam and a leader of a group opposing the buildup. She said her students read Obama's autobiography, "Dreams From My Father," focusing on a coming-of-age passage from his years in Hawaii, in which he describes his realization that he was "utterly alone."

"That's how we feel here," she said. "We feel like we are not being listened to, like we are not being respected."

The federal government's push to further militarize this island -- combined with its heel-dragging in paying for the impact on civilians -- has led many Guam residents to doubt the value of their relationship with the United States.

"This is old-school colonialism all over again," said LisaLinda Natividad, an assistant professor of social work at the University of Guam and an activist opposing the buildup. "It boils down to our political status -- we are occupied territory."

Staff writer Michael D. Shear in Washington contributed to this report.