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LewChewans at the United Nations

*LewChew are also known as Ryukyuan, Okinawan, and Uchinanchu

In 2008 CCPR wrote:

The Committee notes with concern that the State party [Japan] has not officially recognized the Ainu and the Ryukyu/Okinawa as indigenous peoples entitled to special rights and protection. The State party should expressly recognize the Ainu and Ryukyu/Okinawa as indigenous peoples in domestic legislation, adopt special measures to protect, preserve and promote their cultural heritage and traditional way of life, and recognize their land rights. It should also provide adequate opportunities for Ainu and Ryukyu/Okinawa children to receive instruction in or of their language and about their culture, and include education on Ainu and Ryukyu/Okinawa culture and history in the regular curriculum (CCPR/C/JPN/CO/5, para. 32).

In 2009 the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) recognized the LewChewan languages as separate, distinct languages from Japanese, and also recognized their status as endangered (UNESCO, 2009).

In 2010 CERD stated:

While highlighting that UNESCO has recognized a number of Ryukyu languages (2009), as well as the Okinawans' unique ethnicity, history, culture and traditions, the Committee regrets the approach of the State party to accord due recognition to the distinctness of Okinawa and expresses its concern about the persistent discrimination suffered by the people of Okinawa. It further reiterates the analysis of the Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism that the disproportionate concentration of military bases on Okinawa has a negative impact on residents' enjoyment of economic, social and cultural rights (arts. 2 and 5). The Committee encourages the State party to engage in wide consultations with Okinawan representatives with a view to monitoring discrimination suffered by Okinawans, in order to promote their rights and establish

appropriate protection measures and policies (CERD/C/JPN/CO/3-6, para. 21).

In 2012 Japan responded:

Regarding —indigenous people, there is no written definition of this term in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which was adopted by consensus with the participation of Japan, and there is no established definition to be found in Japanese domestic laws, either. Regardless, people who live in Okinawa and natives of Okinawa are Japanese nationals and all of them are equally afforded the rights guaranteed to Japanese nationals.

The history, culture, etc. of Ryukyu and Okinawa are covered, for example, in the Social Studies section in the Courses of Study for lower secondary schools. To be more specific, the roles played by Ryukyu in the context of the relationships between Japan and China are explained as part of the topics on foreign relations during the national isolation policy of the Edo Period.

With regard to the promotion of culture in Okinawa, the Act on Special Measures for Okinawa Promotion and Development was enacted in 2002 and the Plan for Okinawa Promotion and Development was formulated based on this Act. In accordance with this Act and Plan, the Government of Japan, the Okinawa prefectural government, and others are implementing efforts to promote art and culture in the Okinawa region and to protect and utilize the cultural heritage of Okinawa (CCPR/C/JPN/6, para. 337).

In 2014 the CCPR responded:

While welcoming the recognition of the Ainu as an indigenous group, the Committee reiterates its concern regarding the lack of recognition of the Ryukyu and Okinawa, as well as of the rights of those groups to their traditional land and resources and the right of their children to be educated in their language (art. 27). The State party should take further steps to revise its legislation and fully guarantee the rights of Ainu, Ryukyu and Okinawa communities to their traditional land and natural resources, ensuring respect for their right to engage in free, prior and informed participation in policies that affect them and facilitating, to the extent possible, education for their children in their own language (CCPR/C/JPN/CO/6, para. 26).

In 2014 CERD responded to Japan by stating:

The Committee regrets the position of the State party in not recognizing the Ryukyu/Okinawa as indigenous peoples, despite recognition by UNESCO of their unique ethnicity, history, culture and traditions. While noting measures taken and implemented by the State party concerning the Ryukyu — based on the Act on Special

Measures for the Promotion and Development of the Okinawa and the Okinawa Promotion Plan — the Committee is concerned that sufficient measures have not been taken to consult Ryukyu representatives regarding the protection of their rights. The Committee is also concerned by information that not enough has been done to promote and protect the Ryukyuan languages, which are at risk of disappearance, and that education textbooks do not adequately reflect the history and culture of the Ryukyu people (art. 5). The Committee recommends that the State party review its position and consider recognizing the Ryukyu as indigenous peoples and take concrete steps to protect their rights. The Committee also recommends that the State party enhance its consultations with Ryukyu representatives on matters related to the promotion and protection of Ryukyu rights. The Committee further recommends that the State party speed up the implementation of measures adopted to protect the Ryukyuan languages from risk of disappearance, facilitate the education of the Ryukyu people in their own language and include their history and culture in textbooks used in school curricula (CERD/C/JPN/CO/7-9, para. 21).

In 2014 Keiko Itokazu, Native Okinawan and a member of the House of Councilors of Japan representing Okinawa Prefecture, represented Okinawans at the first World Conference of Indigenous Peoples, stating that the Government of Japan should recognize Okinawans as Indigenous and protect the rights of Okinawans under the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). Okinawans have maintained a regular presence in the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues.

In 2016 Japan stated:

We understand that people in Okinawa have inherited a unique culture and tradition over their long history. However, the Government of Japan recognizes only the Ainu people as indigenous people in Japan.

It cannot be said that there is a widespread understanding in Japan that the people from Okinawa are “indigenous people”. For example, in December 2015, the City Council of Tomigusuku, Okinawa Prefecture, adopted an opinion statement (see the attached) stating that “most people of Okinawa do not consider themselves to be indigenous people,” and that the recommendations by the UN treaty bodies which regard the people of Okinawa as “indigenous people” are regrettable and that they should be retracted. In June 2016, the City Council of Ishigaki, Okinawa Prefecture also adopted an opinion statement against the UN recommendations (see attached) which states that the “the comment that the people of Okinawa are indigenous people is incorrect,” requesting that

such recommendation be retracted.

In any case, Japanese nationals both resident in and from Okinawa are equally Japanese nationals, and are equally vested with all the rights reserved for Japanese nationals (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2016).

In 2019 the Peace For Okinawa Coalition, under the auspices of the International Committee for the Indigenous Americans (Incomindios), gave an intervention to the Human Rights Council 41st session:

Since time immemorial Okinawa was an independent nation known as Ryukyu. In 1879 Japan illegally annexed Ryukyu against the will of Ryukyuans. Japan shortly after did the same to many other countries, such as Korea, China, and the Philippines. After World War II all of those nations were given back their independence – except Ryukyu.

During World War II Japan used the Battle of Okinawa as a cover to commit genocide against Ryukyuans, during which Japanese soldiers purposely murdered thousands of Ryukyu civilians, and forced thousands others to commit suicide. Overall at least 140,000 Ryukyuans were killed during a timespan of just a few months, amounting to between one-fourth to one-third of the population.

Today Japan is once again preparing to sacrifice Ryukyuans by placing an inordinate amount of military forces in Ryukyu, which comprises less than 1% of Japan's total territory, yet contains 70% of its military. In the event of another attack from one of Japan's enemies, Ryukyu will again be annihilated.

Ryukyuans have long been peacefully protesting and trying to reverse this inordinate amount of military build up in our home islands. We urge the Human Rights Council to support Ryukyu in this matter; hence, it will be sending a message to the world that peaceful actions are the Council's priority and violence is not the only action that gets the Council's attention. The very foundation of the UN must not be undermined and rendered obsolete. Therefore, we strongly urge the Human Rights Council to assist Ryukyu and to ascertain the fact that Ryukyuans have suffered from prejudice, discrimination, and genocide. (Peace For Okinawa Coalition. 2019, 25 June).

Japan responded:

The crimes that the set NGO mentioned in the context of the past included erroneous or grandiose findings of the fact. All people in or from Okinawa are guaranteed to have and do enjoy full and equal rights that are enjoyed by any other Japanese nationals. The government respects Okinawa's own culture and traditions and seeks to preserve them.

On the other hand it cannot be said that there is a broad recognition in Japan that citizens of Okinawa are indigenous peoples. We also note that the local public municipalities in Okinawa themselves have expressed that they do not recognize the citizens of Okinawa as indigenous peoples.

It is very important that the U.S. forces maintain forward deployment presence in Okinawa based on the Japan – U.S. security treaty from the viewpoint of ensuring the peace and stability of Japan and the region given the very severe security environment surrounding Japan. The Government of Japan is addressing the issue of mitigating the impact of Okinawa as a matter of utmost priority and intends to undertake the impact of mitigation in a visible manner and as a concept of doing everything possible. Japan and the U.S. have agreed to mitigate the impact on Okinawa while maintaining the function of deterrence and undertaking such measures such as the return of U.S. facilities and areas.

The Government of Japan continues to listen attentively to the voices of local communities of Okinawa and build a policy of mitigation of the impact of Okinawa while taking a step-by-step approach. Finally the Government of Japan would like to reiterate that the concentration of the facilities and areas of the U.S. forces on Okinawa results not from any discriminatory intentions whatsoever but from the geopolitical reasons and from the requirements of the national security of Japan (Government of Japan, 2019, 25 June).