

Freedom of the Press in Japan: PM Staff ‘Restrict’ Reporter, Accuse Her of ‘Spreading Misinformation’ About Environmental Impact of New US Military Base

By [Nevin Thompson](#)

Global Research, February 13, 2019

[Global Voices](#) 9 February 2019

Region: [Asia](#), [USA](#)

Theme: [Environment](#), [Law and Justice](#),
[Media Disinformation](#), [Militarization and WMD](#)

In-depth Report: [Militarization of Japan](#)

A decision by Japanese government officials to “restrict” questions from an unnamed reporter during press conferences has provoked protests by other journalists.

The controversy has re-raised longstanding questions about the environmental impact of a controversial new base for US Marines being constructed in the southwestern prefecture of Okinawa.

At the start of 2019, officials from the Cabinet Office (the government ministry that coordinates the operations of Prime Minister Abe Shinzo) directed the [press club](#) covering the Cabinet Office to “restrict” a certain reporter from asking questions during daily press conferences covering the Japanese prime minister. The Cabinet Office also accused the reporter of “spreading misinformation” about the environmental impact of infill.



The unnamed reporter in question is most likely [Mochizuki Isoko](#), a journalist with the Tokyo Shimbun daily newspaper, who is known for asking difficult questions.

In Japan, news outlets typically get access to politicians and government officials through press clubs, which regulate the activities of members, and can even exclude reporters or news outlets. In turn, sources, such as government departments, can deny or limit press

clubs with access. But it's unusual to ban or restrict the activities of journalists from media outlets like [Tokyo Shimbun](#), a prominent daily known for its watchdog approach to government activities.

Reporter questioned environmental effects of construction for US Marine base

Mochizuki apparently angered the Cabinet Office during a news conference on December 26, when she asked about the risks of environmental contamination at a [controversial construction site in Okinawa](#).

In order to build a [long-planned](#) base for US Marines permanently stationed in Okinawa, sand and rock infill is being used to build an artificial island in a bay off of Henoko, a township about 65 km north of Naha, Okinawa.

The construction project is destroying and literally paving over existing tropical coral habitat in the bay. It has been reported that the construction project is using inexpensive red soil infill, instead of the gravel that was budgeted in the project and paid for by the government, in an effort to cut corners. There are also suspicions that construction contractors including [Ryuku Cement](#) are pocketing the difference.

The use of red soil as infill for marine construction projects is specifically [prohibited](#) by Okinawan law, even though the Henoko project has the direct support of the central government in Tokyo. The iron-rich red soil contaminates the surrounding seawater and is deadly to native corals. Local activists such as the [Osprey Fuan Club](#) say the infill also will likely contaminate nearby surviving coral colonies.

□□□□ pic.twitter.com/VddTBdh8e5

— 〇〇〇〇〇〇〇〇〇〇〇〇 (@toshipiko1) [December 21, 2018](#)

"Outrageous."

The preservation of coral habitat displaced or destroyed by the Henoko project has been a contentious and potentially embarrassing issue for the government for the past few months, with Prime Minister Abe even [claiming](#) corals would somehow be moved away from the infill site to be transplanted in a new location.

Reporter accused of asking questions that would 'spread misinformation'

When Mochizuki asked a series of pointed questions about the possible harms of the project at a December 26 press conference, it struck a nerve with media relations staff at the Cabinet Office.

Shortly thereafter, [in their letter to the press club](#), the Cabinet Office strongly denied that red soil was being used as infill, and then also asserted that if it was used, its presence did not contravene Okinawan prefectural laws.

The Cabinet Office did not name Mochizuki, but instead [stated](#) that a “certain reporter” (特定の記者), had asked “inappropriate questions” (“不適切な質問”) that would “spread misinformation” to both members of the press club and to the general public (“誤った情報を広げる”).

□□□□□□□□□□). The Office said this could “impair” the significance of information presented during press interactions with the Cabinet Office itself (“□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□”).

The Cabinet Office then demanded that this unnamed reporter be “restricted” by the press club from asking questions at press events, for supposedly spreading misinformation about infill used in the Henoko project.

The reporter is widely believed to be Mochizuki Isoko, given that she had raised the controversial topic of red soil infill at the December 26 presser.

The letter from the Cabinet Office to the press club came to light more than a month later, on February 1, when it was published by [Sentaku](#), a weekly news magazine. The Sentaku story swiftly generated a firestorm of debate.

An opposition lawmaker [commented](#) that “it’s totally obvious to anyone that it’s red soil” that is being used as infill at the Henoko site. After reading about the news in Sentaku, the Federation of Japanese Newspaper Unions (commonly known as the 日本新聞連合, *Shimbu Roren*) also publicly pushed back against the Cabinet Office, generating even more discussion.

On [February 5](#), the Federation lodged an official complaint with the Cabinet Office.

For the rest of the week, trending hashtags on Twitter included “Tokyo Shimbun reporter restricted from asking questions” (#tokyoshimbunreporter), “towards a country where we can freely ask questions” (#freelyaskquestions) and “we have the right to know” (#wetrigh2know).

When questioned about its letter to the press club, the Cabinet Office [denied](#) that it was trying to shut down Mochizuki or any other reporter:

[illegible]

(There is no intent) to place any conditions or restrictions on the right of reporters to ask questions.

At a February 7 news conference, a Cabinet Office spokesperson also [denied](#) that the unnamed reporter was Mochizuki, after Mochizuki herself — undeterred by previous requests — asked the spokesperson about the intention behind the Cabinet Office’s original letter. She described the letter as “[a form of psychological pressure on me and my company.](#)”

As a reporter, Mochizuki has long endured adversarial treatment from government officials that could be described as deliberate bullying.

A [Harbour Online article](#) from early December notes that Mochizuki typically only receives [2-3 second replies](#) from government officials during press conferences, less than the [22-second replies](#) and explanations her colleagues at Tokyo Shimbun receive, and far less than the [81-second replies](#) reporters at Asahi Shimbun receive on average.

[illegible]

#

<https://t.co/xG5wnBAH3b>

“In regards to Mochizuki Isako from Tokyo Shimbun, here’s an article published in December 2018. In terms of how (the Chief Cabinet Secretary and the Communications Director) behave, here’s a look at how much time is spent answering her questions.

#towards a country where we can freely ask questions”

*

Note to readers: please click the share buttons below. Forward this article to your email lists. Crosspost on your blog site, internet forums. etc.

Featured image: Government infill project at Henoko Bay in Okinawa. Questions about the use of environmentally harmful red soil in the project led to demands that a journalist be shut out of press conferences. Image widely shared on social media.

The original source of this article is [Global Voices](#)
Copyright © [Nevin Thompson](#), [Global Voices](#), 2019

[Comment on Global Research Articles on our Facebook page](#)

[Become a Member of Global Research](#)

Articles by: [Nevin Thompson](#)

Disclaimer: The contents of this article are of sole responsibility of the author(s). The Centre for Research on Globalization will not be responsible for any inaccurate or incorrect statement in this article. The Centre of Research on Globalization grants permission to cross-post Global Research articles on community internet sites as long the source and copyright are acknowledged together with a hyperlink to the original Global Research article. For publication of Global Research articles in print or other forms including commercial internet sites, contact: publications@globalresearch.ca

www.globalresearch.ca contains copyrighted material the use of which has not always been specifically authorized by the copyright owner. We are making such material available to our readers under the provisions of "fair use" in an effort to advance a better understanding of political, economic and social issues. The material on this site is distributed without profit to those who have expressed a prior interest in receiving it for research and educational purposes. If you wish to use copyrighted material for purposes other than "fair use" you must request permission from the copyright owner.

For media inquiries: publications@globalresearch.ca