

Okinawa COVID-19 Spread Slows as Marines Phase in More Aggressive Testing



Okinawa Prefectural Government representatives meet with Marine Corps Installations Pacific leadership and health professionals to discuss COVID-19 information at Camp Foster Naval Hospital. The parties present agreed to continue openly communicating and meeting regularly via teleconference to ensure proper protective measures are met. U.S. MARINE CORPS / Lance Cpl. Karis Mattingly

ARLINGTON, Va. – U.S. Marine Corps leaders on Okinawa have relaxed restrictions for some essential off-base activities as the spread of COVID-19 on the island has slowed and U.S. military headquarters in Japan ordered a more rigorous novel coronavirus testing policy for personnel arriving on the island.

On July 29, Okinawa-based Marine Corps Installations Pacific (MCIPAC) reported that no one affiliated with the Marines on the island – uniformed, family member, or civilian employee – had tested positive for COVID-19 in the previous 24 hours. “We are still testing some groups and will be testing close contacts before they can exit quarantine,” Maj. Kenneth Kunze, an MCIPAC spokesman, said in a July 29 statement e-mailed to *Seapower*.

“Leadership is confident that we have contained the outbreak and are working hard to continue to mitigate the spread as the number of cases within the civilian population continues to rise on Okinawa and service members and families continue to [permanent change of station] to the island.”

Also on July 29, U.S. Forces-Japan, a component of U.S. Indo-Pacific Command overseeing all U.S. defense issues in Japan,

directed all Status of Forces Agreement (S0FA) personnel to undergo COVID-19 exit tests prior to release from the 14-day restriction of movement (ROM) already required of all new arrivals, including military, civilians, families and contractors.

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Maj. Kenneth Kunze, MCIPAC spokesman

Exit testing will be done between day 10 and 14 of the ROM requirement, and individuals must complete their full 14 days of isolation, regardless of the test result. Individuals testing positive will move from ROM into isolation. Component commanders were directed to develop and implement safety procedures for the new testing. Japanese officials in Okinawa and Tokyo have complained that the U.S. military was not doing enough to ensure all their arrivals from overseas were being tested.

On July 28, the Marines loosened some restrictions on off-base activities on Okinawa, which has been under stricter health protection rules than bases in Japan since July 11. Restrictions were eased on outdoor physical fitness activities and visiting off-base essential services like doctors, veterinarians, banks, grocery stores and gas stations. While personnel and their families may opt to use off-base schools and child-care centers, off-base liberty and recreation still are prohibited.

Navy and Marine Corps medical personnel, after “vigorous contact tracing and conducting more than 4,500 COVID-19 tests in the past month,” have identified two clusters, III Marine Expeditionary Force said in a press release. Those clusters

are at Camp Hansen and Marine Corps Air Station Futenma, both of which are on Okinawa. Most of these individuals have been in quarantine since July 18, some since July 12, III MEF said on a Facebook posting.

“The level of testing has decreased over the last few days as the large batch testing of entire groups and units on Camp Hansen and MCAS Futenma have [been] reduced,” Kunze said.

As of July 24, there were 189 cases of COVID-19 at U.S. military installations in Japan and outlying islands, according to U.S. Forces-Japan. They included 84 at Camp Hansen, the worst-hit, 78 at MCAS Futenma, and two at Kadena Air Base, a U.S. Air Force facility, all on Okinawa. Two other Marine Corps installations on Okinawa, Camps Courtney and Kinser, each reported one person testing positive.

MCAS Iwakuni and Naval Air Facility Atsugi in Japan both reported three cases each and Fleet Activities, Yokosuka, reported nine cases. The remaining cases were at Army and Air Force bases in Japan.