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Support or not, military buildup projects proceeding

Gaynor D. Daleno | The Guam Daily Post 6 hrs ago



ANDERSEN AIR FORCE BASE: These box trusses, shown in September last year, are part of a military construction project to house MV-22B Osprey tilt rotor aircraft hangar, to support the relocation of Marines to Guam. Each box truss weighs 100 tons and six of the being installed. The cost of the project is \$54.2 million. Courtesy of U.S Marine Corps

Whether or not Guam's governor supports the construction of a Marine Corps base on the island, military projects related to the \$8.7 billion plan have moved forward, and will continue.

To date, approximately \$500 million in construction projects have either been completed or awarded and underway, according to Joint Region Marianas, which coordinates and oversees the projects in Guam.

The projects are in preparation for the relocation of about 4,100 Marines from Okinawa to Guam several years from now, under an agreement signed between the United States and Japan to draw down the amount of U.S. troops in Okinawa.

On Thursday, Gov. Eddie Calvo surprised many in Guam when he announced at a Rotary Club of Guam meeting that he would no longer support the relocation of Marines to Guam, also commonly referred to as the "military buildup."

The governor said he would hold off on his support until the federal government helps the government of Guam and the Guam construction industry resolve a critical shortage of skilled construction workers. The number of skilled foreign workers in Guam who are on H-2 visas has dipped to about 170 during a recent count from more than 1,300 a year ago, delaying some projects and causing others to become more expensive because of the labor shortage, the governor has said.

The governor said the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service's near-100 percent denial of H-2B visa petitions from Guam employers will suck the available workers into projects on the military bases, and leave the civilian projects with an "emaciated" work force.

The governor has traveled to Washington, D.C., and met with USCIS under the new Trump administration to explain Guam's labor woes, but no significant easing of visa restrictions has so far been seen on the island.

A U.S. Government Accountability Office report released yesterday addressed the Defense Department's plans to shift 4,100 Marines to Guam, and identified the island's labor shortage as one of the reasons for possible cost-overruns and possible delays in moving the Guam-bound Marines.

National security focus

Rear Adm. Shoshana Chatfield, commander of Joint Region Marianas and the Defense Department representative in Guam, Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, Federated States of Micronesia and the Republic of Palau, said yesterday Marines are being moved to Guam as part of the national security requirements.

"I want to stress how important it is that we examine the national security requirements of the United States, and we've been asked to get this buildup, and bringing Marines (to) Guam for our presence here in the Pacific," Chatfield said.

Japan is paying almost \$3 billion of the \$8.7 billion projected cost for the Guam part of the reduction of Marines' presence in Okinawa.

In expressing his frustration on Thursday, the governor called the federal government's high rate of denials of H-2B visa petitions "an economic warfare and sabotage."

Chatfield did acknowledge the governor's concern that without easing the labor shortage, Guam's economy could slide if there aren't enough construction workers for civilian projects.

"I will say ... that I agree on the fact that Guam's economy should not be set back by this buildup," Chatfield said.

She said she has met the governor previously on the military's efforts to work with USCIS on the labor shortage in Guam.

The governor also announced he would ask the local attorney general's office to join the Guam Contractors Association in the ongoing lawsuit against USCIS over the H-2B visa denials.

Industry voices 'steadfast support' for buildup

The GCA's officers and directors, however stated that while the organization understands the governor's frustration over the H-2B visa issue, it doesn't support withdrawing support for the military buildup.

"Construction contractors, along with related businesses, have invested heavily in plant, equipment and human capital in anticipation of the military buildup dating from 2004 when it was first announced," according to the GCA.

"If the buildup on Guam were to be canceled, those businesses would suffer a significant uninsurable loss."

GCA's member businesses will find a way to support the military buildup, regardless of the labor challenges, according to the organization.

"While GCA recognizes the value of the H-2B visa program, local construction companies, being resilient as they are, can still perform quality workmanship with a limited resource of temporary

foreign labor, albeit at a slower pace and a higher cost," according to the contractors' group.

"The GCA remains steadfast in its support of the military buildup and will continue its due diligence in resolving the H-2B visa issues and providing nationally recognized training and credentials for our local workforce through the GCA Trades Academy."

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