Newsletter from Ambassador in charge of Okinawan Affairs
No.11: Applications Now Open: TOFU Program

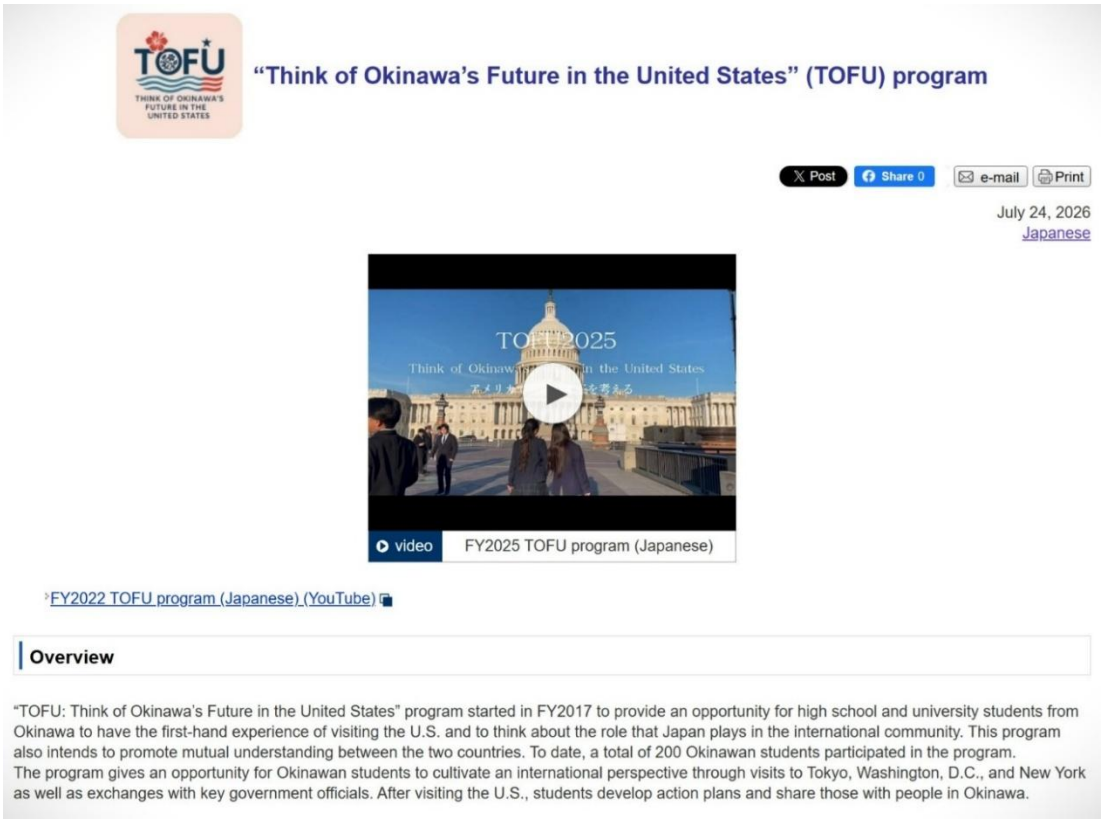
30 October 2026



TOFU Program Visit to the U.S. Department of State (20 March 2026)

Applications are now open for the TOFU (Think of Okinawa's Future in the United States) program, which sends high school and university students from Okinawa to the U.S. (Deadline: Wednesday, 25 November).

This program aims to foster mutual understanding between Japan and the U.S. by helping Okinawan youth experience the real America and learn about Japan's global role. During the week-long trip to Tokyo, Washington, D.C., and New York, participants will build global perspectives by meeting with government officials, visiting U.S. agencies and the United Nations, and presenting their own proposals afterward.In this newsletter, I would like to share the history and highlights of the program.



MOFA's TOFU Program website (As of October 2026)

● History of the TOFU Program

The TOFU Program was launched in FY2017, with its first delegation visiting Washington, D.C. and New York in March 2018. While the second program (FY2018) followed the same format, the FY2019 program was canceled due to COVID-19. The program then shifted to a hybrid format (Tokyo and online) for the third year (FY2020) and fully online for the fourth (FY2021).

U.S. visits resumed with the fifth program (FY2022). Pre-departure orientations were introduced in the sixth program (FY2023). Additionally, the post-program reporting sessions—originally held separately by each local municipality—were combined into a joint session for all participants in FY2023, and have included action-plan presentations based on the experiences from the TOFU Program since the seventh program (FY2024).

Furthermore, starting in FY2024, selected participants have been appointed as "Japan-U.S. Exchange Student Ambassadors." Upon returning home, they are actively planning exchange events, networking with TOFU alumni, and sharing information on websites and social media.

For more details on the history and development of the TOFU Program, please visit the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA)'s TOFU Program website.



Pre-Departure Orientation
(23 February 2026, at the MOFA Okinawa Liaison Office)

● Pre-Departure Orientation

The first TOFU event I attended was the Pre-Departure Orientation held this February at the Okinawa Liaison Office of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) for the 30 participants of the 8th TOFU Program (FY2025). During the session, the participants introduced themselves and prepared for their trip by assigning roles for the upcoming events in Tokyo, Washington, D.C., and New York in March.

In my remarks, I shared my expectations for the participants, who also received an encouraging video message from Mr. Andrew Ou, the U.S. Consul General in Okinawa. It was an opportunity for the students to deepen their thoughts before departure. Although they range from high school to university students with diverse backgrounds from across Okinawa, collaborating in groups for this

shared program made their preparation truly meaningful.



Visit to Arlington National Cemetery (20 March 2026, Washington, D.C.)

● **Visit to Tokyo, Washington, D.C., and New York**

In March, participants traveled to Tokyo, Washington, D.C., and New York for an eight-day program. Please watch our five-minute video to see highlights of their trip.

In Tokyo, the group paid courtesy calls on Chief Cabinet Secretary Kihara Minoru, State Minister for Foreign Affairs Horii Iwao, and State Minister of Defense Miyazaki Masahisa.

In Washington, D.C., they visited the Department of State, the U.S. Congress, and the Embassy of Japan, and interacted with local students. As their trip coincided with Prime Minister Takaichi's visit to the U.S., they had the special opportunity to watch her wreath-laying ceremony at Arlington National Cemetery from the front row. They also visited George Washington University to view the "Okinawa Collection" (donated by Okinawa Prefecture) and speak with the staff.

In New York, they visited the UN Headquarters and the Permanent Mission of Japan to the UN, where they attended a lecture by Japanese UN staff. They also attended a reception hosted by the Consulate-General of Japan to connect with the local Okinawan diaspora.

A key feature of the TOFU program is the opportunity for participants to visit the frontlines of Japan-U.S. relations and UN diplomacy and engage directly with key officials. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in partnership with overseas diplomatic missions and relevant organizations, offers this program to high school and university students from Okinawa.



TOFU Program Follow-up Reporting Session (26 April 2026, Ginowan City)

● Follow-up Reporting Session

In late April, the follow-up reporting session was held in Ginowan City, bringing together approximately 200 participants. Attendees included current TOFU program participants, their families, and alumni, alongside key supporters such as Diet members, local mayors, the Governor of Okinawa, prefectural assembly

members, business leaders, and representatives from the U.S. Consulate General and U.S. Forces in Okinawa.

Following opening remarks by State Minister for Foreign Affairs Horii and a video overview of the program, the participants split into five groups to present their proposals for Okinawa's future in both Japanese and English. They presented concrete, action-oriented proposals that they would lead themselves:

1. U.S.-Japan Karate Exchange in Okinawa
2. Youth Mini-Diplomacy Forum
3. International Understanding Workshops for junior high school students
4. Interactive Educational Project: Reflecting on security and Okinawa's future
5. Cultural, Historical, and Peace Dialogues ("Yuntaku") across Okinawa, and a joint youth camp for U.S. and Japanese high school students

Attending the session, I felt it was highly meaningful, as it provided a valuable opportunity for the participants to share their ideas with a wide range of stakeholders and further deepen their perspectives.

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Group 2 Action Plan: "Mini-Diplomacy Forum"
(19 September 2026, at Kadena Language Institute)

● Implementing the Action Plans

The five groups are now putting their action plans into practice. In September, Group 2 held their "Mini-Diplomacy Forum," and in October, Group 4 hosted the "Student Dialogue Workshop on Okinawa's Base Issues."

Group 2: "Mini-Diplomacy Forum" (September)

Inspired by their participation in the TOFU Program, the members recognized the importance of mutual understanding. They wanted to create a space to discuss Japan-U.S. relations seriously, break down taboos through dialogue, and learn diverse perspectives. To achieve this, they organized an English-language discussion session between students of the Kadena Language Institute and young personnel from Kadena Air Base, which was held with the cooperation of the Institute.

Group 4: "Student Dialogue Workshop on Okinawa's Base Issues" (October)

This workshop brought together high school and university students from Okinawa and Waseda University to learn together and think of the military base issues as their own matters. About 40 online participants divided into small groups for serious discussions on topics such as the impact of military facilities on daily life, training, and security concerns.



Kadena Air Base Tour organized by Japan-U.S. Exchange Student Ambassadors (18 August 2026, at Kadena Air Base)

● **Japan-U.S. Exchange Student Ambassadors**

Even after returning from their trip to the U.S., the Japan-U.S. Exchange Student Ambassadors continue to engage past TOFU Program participants. Together, they organize visits to U.S. Forces' facilities in Okinawa, hold discussions with U.S. Forces' personnel, and participate in joint Japan-U.S. volunteer cleanups. These activities are featured on the TOFU Information Portal.

The TOFU Program will celebrate its 10th anniversary in FY2027. We are deeply grateful to local municipalities and all our supporters who have helped this program grow. We appreciate your continued support and feedback as we look

toward further development.

KIYA Masahiko
Ambassador in charge of Okinawan Affairs