

'Stop Repeating History': Plan to Keep Migrant Children at Former Internment Camp Draws Outrage

By Ben Fenwick

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FORT SILL, Okla. — For Satsuki Ina, who was born in a Japanese-American internment camp during World War II, the news that the United States would detain undocumented migrant children at this Army base in Oklahoma felt like an unwelcome wallop from the past.

The base, Fort Sill, Okla., once held 700 Japanese-Americans who lived in tents in desertlike heat, surrounded by barbed wire and guards. They were among the more than 100,000 residents of Japanese ancestry who were rounded up by the government during the war and placed in detention camps around the country.

Ms. Ina and more than 200 demonstrators arrived at Fort Sill on Saturday to protest the government's latest plan for the base: to house 1,400 undocumented children who arrived in the United States without a parent or a legal guardian. The protesters called the plan, which was announced this month, a return to one of the nation's great shames.

"We are here to say, 'Stop repeating history,'" Ms. Ina, 75, said at a news conference on Saturday, standing in front of a howitzer display outside the base.

It will not be the first time in recent history that the base will house migrants. The Obama administration held several thousand immigrant children at Fort Sill in 2014. Ms. Ina protested then, too.

But the announcement this month came amid sharply escalating rhetoric over the country's immigration policies, and as the country's network of detention facilities struggles to keep up with an influx of new arrivals. Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Democrat of New York, ignited a furor and took criticism from some members in her own party this past week when she referred to migrant detention centers as concentration camps.

Regardless of how they are characterized, the facilities have been stretched thin. Many are operating well past their capacities and reports of grim and dangerous conditions have roiled an already tense debate. The Trump administration has tried a number of measures to respond to the migrant surge, from building tent cities in Texas to enacting family separation policies and rules meant to deter new asylum seekers.

Senator James Lankford of Oklahoma argued that the protesters were misreading the government's intentions.

"The whole focus on 'these are concentration camps' or 'these are like internment camps' — they are clearly not," Mr. Lankford, a Republican, said. "They are trying to manage a humanitarian issue."

He said he had visited Fort Sill when the Obama administration had detained migrant children there. "It was extremely well done, and they were extremely well cared for," he said.

The Health and Human Services Department, which manages the Office of Refugee Resettlement, said that the plan for Fort Sill was only temporary, and that it would relieve pressure on an overcrowded system.

Still, turning to this particular base — which is home to the Army's main artillery school, but is perhaps more famous for the people it once imprisoned — has touched a nerve.

In the 19th century, the Army held hundreds of Chiricahua Apache warriors who surrendered in the conflicts between Native Americans and the United States; Geronimo was one of them and is buried at the base. During World War II, a distraught Japanese detainee, Kanesaburo Oshima, was fatally shot there as he tried to climb the barb-wire fence, becoming a symbol of the imprisonment of Japanese-Americans. The United States formally apologized for the internment of Japanese-American citizens in 1988.

For descendants of the Japanese-Americans and the Native Americans who knew Fort Sill as a prison, not the verdant military training ground and national landmark it is today, the government's new plan raised bitter questions about whether the nation had truly reckoned with its darker past. After the news conference on Saturday, the protesters moved to a nearby park when the police ordered them to leave the base.

"My grandfather was imprisoned on Fort Sill for 20 years with Geronimo," said Jeff Haozous, 57, a member of the Fort Sill Apache tribe who stood in the sweltering heat at the protest. The one condition Geronimo demanded for surrender, he added, "was to keep the families together. The one promise they kept was they kept the families together."

A spokesman for the Defense Department said that the Health and Human Services Department, not the Army, would manage the detention facility, which would be designed to be appropriate for children. The active military units on site would only provide security, he added.

But for Ms. Ina and others at the protest — where they shouted "No more concentration camps!" and "Reunification, not separation!" — there were still far too many unsettling parallels between past and present.

"There are many similarities that resonate through our own experiences," Ms. Ina said. "Imprisoning children without meeting certain standards of care. We had family separation and indefinite detention. We suffered long-term health problems and mental health problems long afterward."