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Closing the book on Aum?

By J. Berkshire Miller

The Diplomat (25.11.11) / HRWF (29.11.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> - A few months back, I outlined the continued legacy of the notorious Japanese cult, Aum Shinrikyo. Sixteen years have passed since the group, led by its eccentric leader Shoko Asahara, shocked Japan with its bold sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway in 1995. The attack resulted in the deaths of 12 people, injured hundreds of others and shook Japan's image as a country free of terrorism.

This week, Japan attempted to exorcise this painful history, with the Supreme Court upholding its conviction of the last senior Aum official, Seiichi Endo. Supreme Court Justice Seishi Kanetsuki condemned the cult as "extremely antisocial and showed outrageous disregard for human life." The court ruling also acknowledged that despite Endo being innocent of perpetrating specific attacks, he remained criminally responsible for "misuse of his scientific knowledge in connection with the crimes." Endo has been sentenced to death, making him the thirteenth member of Aum to be sent to death row.

Endo's conviction is significant for a couple reasons. First, it represents the symbolic end of a nearly two decade-long set of trial proceedings against Aum. Since the Tokyo attack, there have been criminal proceedings against 189 members of the cult, all except one of which resulted in convictions. Endo's conviction marks the final trial against senior Aum officials, and thus has been hailed by Japanese officials as the end of a tragic era.

The conviction is also noteworthy because Endo, unlike Aum leaders Asahara and Fumihiko Joyu, was not a prominent figure in the group's operations. Endo was a scientist who studied medicine at the prestigious Kyoto University. However, during the trial he was determined to have helped Aum manufacture the sarin gas used in multiple incidents including the Tokyo subway attack.

Aum used several different chemicals in its attacks, such as the nerve agent sarin, phosgene, and VX gas. In its early attacks, before 1995, Aum largely targeted attorneys, judges and journalists who were seen as sympathetic to the group's victims. Prosecutors linked Endo to one such incident from May 1994, when Aum members tried to kill an attorney by releasing sarin gas outside of a local courthouse in Tokyo. One month later, in June 1994, Aum launched its most devastating attack up to that point by releasing sarin gas in Matsumoto city using a van equipped with a heating pot and fan. The Matsumoto attack killed seven civilians, and seriously injured 144 others. Endo was found by Japanese security officials at the scene of the attack. The attacks were targeted at judges who were presiding over a fraud case in which several Aum members had been charged.

So, does this close the book on Japan's prolific cult? Not completely. After the Tokyo subway attack, Aum divided itself into two interconnected groups. The predominant group was named Aleph, while a splinter group also was established called Hikari no Wa (Circle of Rainbow Light). The Public Security Intelligence Agency (PSIA) and local police continue to blanket the group's descendants with the backing of a Subversive Organizations Control Act that has been in effect for the past decade. The legislation allows PSIA to conduct intrusive raids on Aum safe houses and maintain heavy surveillance on Aum-owned properties. But the legislation authorizing such raids is set to expire in 2012, which could significantly inhibit Japan's ability to monitor the group. Even as one chapter closes with Endo's conviction, another one now opens as lawmakers debate the need to keep a watchful eye on Aum.

What has become of the AUM cult?

The Mainichi Daily News (22.11.11) / HRWF (23.11.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> - The Mainichi answers common questions readers may have about what has become of the AUM Shinrikyo cult that perpetrated the deadly sarin attacks against the public in the mid-1990s.

Question: The AUM criminal trials have ended, but are there still followers of the organization?

Answer: Yes, in the form of successor groups. From 2000, AUM began a series of name changes, and it now operates under the name "Aleph." There also exist splinter groups, but other than "Hikari no Wa" (Circle of Light), which is headed by former top AUM member Fumihiko Joyu, they have not drawn much attention. At the end of October, in documents submitted to the Public Security Intelligence Agency (PSIA), Aleph claimed around 1,100 followers, while Hikari no Wa claimed around 200. Aleph holds 24 facilities across 13 prefectures, and Hikari no Wa holds eight facilities across eight prefectures.

Q: Are the believers still devoted to former AUM leader and death row inmate Chizuo Matsumoto (Shoko Asahara)?

A: For years after the AUM attacks, devotion to Matsumoto was not seen. According to the PSIA, however, starting in 2009 pictures of Matsumoto began being prominently displayed on altars at Aleph facilities. Furthermore, on Matsumoto's birthday on March 2, Aleph members supposedly mark the time of his birth with group meditation.

Q: What about Hikari no Wa followers?

A: They claim to have shed his influence, but the PSIA believes based on its investigations that the organization had its roots as a successor to AUM planned by Matsumoto around the time of his arrest. A ritual given by Joyu to believers called "empowerment" is said to be almost identical to a ritual called "initiation" that was conducted by Matsumoto.

Q: Do the two groups still get new followers?

A: There appears to have been a sharp increase in Aleph followers recently, with over 90 new followers last year and over 200 new followers this year as of the end of October. The group is said to attract members through Internet community sites or by asking young people in busy city areas whether they are interested in things like fortune-telling or yoga. Hikari no Wa reportedly had around 10 new followers this year as of the end of October.

Q: Are these two groups dangerous?

A: They both are being monitored under a law enacted in 1999. Every three months, the organizations have to report their financial status and number of followers to the PSIA, and the PSIA conducts investigations of their facilities when deemed necessary.

The monitoring can be done for a maximum of three years before a renewal is necessary. This January will be the end of the current period, and within the year the Ministry of Justice is expected to ask the Public Security Examination Commission, which holds authority to decide how to handle such a designation, to again extend the monitoring period. (Answers by Ichiro Ito, City News Department).

Can AUM Shinrikyo cult founder Asahara be executed?

The Mainichi Daily News (22.11.11) / HRWF (23.11.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> - Since the death penalty handed down on 13 former top members of the AUM Shinrikyo cult over a series of crimes including murder has been confirmed, attention is now focused on whether cult founder Shoko Asahara is fit to be executed.

The Justice Ministry will consider executing the 13 including Asahara in accordance with the Code of Criminal Procedure.

However, the lawyer for Asahara, 56, whose real name is Chizuo Matsumoto, has claimed that the guru is suffering from mental illness. Law enforcement authorities can legally suspend the execution of a sentence if the convict is mentally ill.

Asahara is now detained in a solitary cell at the Tokyo Detention Center. Sources close to him say he hardly speaks, just whispers. In the daytime, he constantly sits on his knees or cross-legged, and seldom moves.

A detention center guard occasionally helped him eat, but he is now eating by himself again.

Asahara has been incontinent since March 2001, and was able to urinate properly only once in 2007, according to lawsuit records that his family launched claiming that law enforcement authorities failed to properly provide sufficient medical treatment to Asahara in prison.

Asahara now responds when he is encouraged to take a bath or do exercise, but has refused to meet his family.

Nevertheless, it is the general opinion among law enforcement authorities that he is fit to be executed. "There are various views, but he understands the meaning of words spoken by others. He's not mentally ill," an official says.

The Code of Criminal Procedure requires the justice minister to order the execution of a death-row inmate within six months after the ruling is confirmed. However, the law also stipulates that if the inmate's accomplices are standing trial or if the inmate is demanding a retrial, then this period must be excluded from the six-month period.

The death penalty on all 12 accomplices of Asahara has been confirmed, but the Tokyo High Court is now trying Asahara's second request for a retrial. Many of the 12 are also asking for a retrial.

The government is of the view that the justice minister does not have to be punished even if he violates the six-month clause in the Code of Criminal Procedure. "Even if the minister violates it, it won't immediately cause any legal problems. It's just an advisory provision," an official said.

Those executed between 2000 and 2009 had spent five years and 11 months on average behind bars after their rulings were confirmed.

Moreover, whether to issue an execution order depends largely on each justice minister. There are many people who refused to issue a single execution order while serving as justice minister.

Since the Democratic Party of Japan took over the reins of government in September 2009, two death-row inmates have been executed.

Justice Minister Hideo Hiraoka has declined to say whether he will issue an execution order while he is in his current post. "I'll cautiously make judgment on each individual case in view of the fact that the death penalty is the ultimate punishment," he told a news conference following a regular Cabinet meeting on Nov. 11.

Cult leader arrested for swindling 13 million yen through 'prayer fees'

The Manichi Daily News (13.09.2011) / HRWF (14.09.2011) – <http://www.hrwf.net> - Manichi, Japan - The leader of a company known for pitching so-called spiritual-pressure sales has been arrested for swindling customers out of more than 13 million yen, police said.

Toru Saito, 53, who heads the Yamanashi-based group "Shinsekai," stands accused of violating the Act for Punishment of Organized Crimes. Saito has reportedly denied the allegations.

According to Kanagawa Prefectural Police, Saito instructed the operators of "salons" in Tokyo affiliated with the Shinsekai group to defraud five customers of a total of 13.4 million yen between 2004 and 2006 under the pretext of "prayer fees" and other purposes.

Furthermore, Saito, who also serves as a board member of the group, had received some 1.5 billion yen in executive remunerations since 2001, according to Kanagawa Prefectural Police.

Police obtained arrest warrants for four high-ranking members of the group on Aug. 17 and had arrested two of them by Sept. 1. Investigators subsequently found Saito at a short-term rental condominium in Osaka and arrested him on Sept. 12. He had apparently moved in on that day. Some 12 million yen in cash was found in a bag he possessed at the time of his arrest. The condominium was rented under the name of a person with links to Shinsekai.

The remaining member -- a 70-year-old female executive of the company -- is still at large, police said.

Law enforcers have already arrested four others including the operators of affiliated salons and indicted them for fraud.
