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Members of Aum Shinrikyo religious cult sects reach record high

The Japan Daily Press (24.12.2012) - The Japanese government's Public Security Intelligence Agency (PSIA) has released a report that shows a record high number of new followers in the two split factions of the **Aum Shinrikyo** religious cult, known as being responsible for the sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway system in 1995. Since that incident and the search and arrests for all member involved, a **hunt that ended this summer**, the cult split into two sects, each revoking any relation to Aum, but the government keeps regular tabs on their activities.

In the records **revealed** December 21st, the PSIA says that the total number of new followers joining **Aleph**, the more mainstream Aum Shinrikyo sect, and the breakaway Circle of Rainbow Light, now stands at 255. The two groups **have been under government surveillance** since 2000, and are required to submit records on their number of followers and assets four times a year. The final report for 2012 shows an increase from the 213 new members in 2011, and nearly three times more than those in 2008.

The largest increase in demographics is those aged 35 or under, making up 22% of new followers at the end of 2008, but now at 32%. Those in their 20s specifically have risen from 7% to 19% over the same four years. Aleph has been found to be entering university campuses in April, the beginning of Japan's school year, and again in May and November, when festivals are often held. They then put up flyers for their organization on bulletin boards meant for school clubs without permission. The **PSIA** is concerned over these actions as the posters don't specifically have the Aleph name or reveal the group's religious nature. While the number of new members is increasing, the total follower count shows no drastic changes as people regularly quit the cult as well.

Splinter groups of Aum Shinrikyo religious cult get security investigations

The Japan Daily Press (02.11.2012) - On Thursday, officials from Japan's Public Security Intelligence Agency began investigations of 21 facilities owned by the group Aleph, a departure and renaming of Japan's infamous Aum Shinrikyo religious cult. Eight facilities of another splinter group, Hikari no Wa (Circle of Rainbow Light), which is led by former Aum spokesperson Fumihiko Joyu, were also inspected. The Aum Shinrikyo cult is most known for its sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway system in 1995, for which the group's founder and leading members are still on death row.

The 29 facilities are located in 15 of Japan's prefectures, spread out across the entire country. The Public Security Intelligence Agency operates under the Ministry of Justice, and is responsible for collecting and analyzing information on any potential threats to public safety or security. The last collective inspection of facilities operated by former Aum groups was in August 2011. During the massive police raids of the main Aum Shinrikyo compound near Tokyo after the subway attack, they discovered the cult had amassed a huge collection of guns, explosives, and other weapons, in preparation for a large-scale battle.

This year's nation-wide inspections were triggered as a result of ending the 17 year-hunt for the final Aum fugitives. Naoko Kikuchi and Katsuya Takahashi were both arrested, less than two weeks apart, this summer. Takahashi led police on a final chase for about a week after they were tipped off about his location, only several hours ahead of them the entire way. The government's Public Security Examination Commission stated in January of this year that the Aum-related groups would remain close surveillance for the next two to three years.

\$319,800 reward for info on cult suspects

Asia One (11.08.2012) - The National Police Agency has announced that the 20 million yen reward (S\$319,800) for information that led to the arrests of former Aum Supreme Truth cult members Naoko Kikuchi, 40, and Katsuya Takahashi, 54, will be paid to three people.

This is the second time a reward will be paid since the reward system using public funds was introduced in May 2007, following the 2007 murder of British woman Lindsay Hawker. The culprit in the case, Tatsuya Ichihashi, 33, was arrested and sentenced to life imprisonment thanks to information from the public.

For information on Kikuchi, who has been indicted for aiding attempted murder and other charges, 10 million yen will be paid to one person. As two people contributed to the arrest of Takahashi, who has been indicted for murder and other charges, 10 million yen will be split between them based on their contributions.

To protect the informants' identities, the NPA did not release their personal information, including their gender, or the distribution ratio.

The reward for the fugitives was initially 5 million yen each - 2 million yen from a private organisation of retired police officers and 3 million yen in public funds. But after another former Aum member, 47-year-old Makoto Hirata, who has been indicted for illegal abduction and confinement, turned himself in, public attention on former Aum members increased and the NPA decided to raise the rewards to 10 million yen in February.

Abduction and deprivation of freedom for the purpose of forced religious de-conversion gets exposure in the U.S. Capitol

Human Rights Without Frontiers (HRWF) has been invited to a lunch briefing entitled "America's Response to Religious Persecution in Allied Nations" at the U.S. Capitol and has mandated Dr Aaron Rhodes, former executive director of the International Helsinki Federation and co-author of HRWF report on religious de-conversion under coercion in Japan. Below an excerpt of the report of UC Family about this event.

***HRWF report is available on Amazon.com
"Japan: Abduction, Deprivation of Freedom with the Purpose of Religious De-conversion"***

http://www.amazon.com/s/ref=nb_sb_noss?url=search-alias%3Daps&field-keywords=Japan+Abduction+and+Deprivation+of+Freedom

UC Family (01.08.2012) - The issue of violent abductions of Unificationists in Japan finally got exposure to lawmakers and congressional staff at a briefing in the U.S. Capitol on Wednesday, August 1, 2012.

Rev. In Jin Moon, president of the Unification Church USA, U.S. Congressman Danny Davis of Chicago, and a distinguished panel of human-rights experts called for the U.S. State Department to commence talks with the government of Japan on the issue of religious persecution of minority religions in Japan.

"The things that are taking place in Japan are an egregious violation of human rights that needs to be stopped - one cannot put rape, physical abuse, mental torture, and emotional manipulation as simply a family matter," Rev. Moon told the 70 persons gathered in a room in the House Visitors' Center. "This is not just a family matter [as claimed by Japanese authorities]."

The Capitol Hill Lunch briefing, titled "America's Response to Religious Persecution in Allied Nations," was organized by the Universal Peace Federation (UPF).

The three religious-freedom activists at the briefing included Dr. Aaron Rhodes, former director of the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights and founder and principle investigator of the Freedom Rights Project, Tina Ramirez, veteran Capitol Hill specialist in religious freedom, and Kathryn Cameron Porter, president and founder of the Leadership Council for Human Rights and a catalyst for the creation of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission. Their speeches have been transcribed below.

Unificationist attendees included Dan Fefferman, president of the International Coalition for Religious Freedom, representatives from the Washington Times, faith-breaking survivor Kiyomi Miyama, who was invited to the United States from Japan to report her two ordeals at the hands of abductors, Ichiko Sudo, a radio talk-show host and representative of Survivors Against Forced Exit (SAFE) who translated for Miyama, Luke Higuchi, president of SAFE, college student Hanayo Ito, who is visiting the States to talk about her experience with persecution on campus and Victoria Roomet, president of the Collegiate Association for the Research of Principles (CARP).

Jim Gavin, president of UPF USA, offered welcoming remarks and introduced Kathryn Porter as the mediator of the 90-minute program. Congressman Daniel K. Davis, who had recently traveled to Japan with Kathryn Porter to speak out against religious intolerance there, stopped by the briefing room to offer remarks on the topic of human rights as well. "We are in a world that so often loves but so often practices hate. I think that my rights end where the next person's rights begin. If I can't exercise what I believe, then I'm kidding myself."

Aaron Rhodes' Remarks

"I've been involved in human rights for about 20 years now, and I do believe, based on past experiences, that it is right for the United States government to place the emphasis that it has upon the freedom of religion as one of the most important of human rights. It's politically incorrect to state that any human right is more important than any other human right, but I personally feel that the freedom rights are the most important ones.

"Now, why is it that the United States government is so concerned about religious freedom? Why is it that people are so concerned with religious freedom? I have lived abroad for the past 20 years and have heard criticizing comments around that question in an international forum.

"Is it something to be explained by politics? Is it some sort of sentimental attachment to past persecutions? Is it something about the feelings or beliefs about the particular groups? Well, I say 'no' to all these explanations. The freedom of religion is a universal, spiritual, physical, and social necessity. It is just as important to every person on earth as it is to Americans. In this sense, this is no American exception - which I believe is a very misleading term, by the way; it's kind of like the term 'the chosen people,' which is also a very misleading term. Instead, there is a unique American appreciation of the universal aspiration to religious freedom, and the universal obligation to respect this freedom.

"The picture regarding religious freedom today is not all that good, and human rights in the world aren't improving. We have to keep struggling all the time to maintain the freedoms that we have and to prevent backsliding. The struggle to protect the freedom of religion is perpetual. We are not moving towards an era of freedom and openness. This is shown by developed democracies infringing on the freedom of human rights and the freedom of expression.

"And that's why the topic of this meeting is quite timely. Let me give you some examples. It's not just the new religions that are at risk. In Germany, where I lived, circumcision constituted bodily harm. German politicians have called circumcision a barbaric ritual. 40 percent of Germans apparently agree that the state should make such decisions in paternalistic fashions. In fact, infringements on religious groups are generally justified by the need of the state to protect the citizens from themselves. [In addition,] Japan is a liberal democracy with a very strong constitutional tradition based on the one in this country. Japan is violating the human rights of members of religious minorities who have been subjected to abduction, to the deprivation of freedom and physical abuse."

Tina Ramirez's Remarks

"On Monday, the day that the state department released its Religious Freedom Report, everybody wanted to know who's been named as country of particular concern in terms of violators of religious freedom. Today we will hopefully not disappoint you. We're not talking about the countries of particular concern - we're talking about democratic allies. Japan and many countries in Europe have spoken up.

"As many of you know, in the U.S. is a great debate around religious freedom and think in line with Rev. Moon's comments. Earlier Rep. Davis said, 'If I can't express myself, I'm lying to myself.' The fact is religious belief and expression gets at the core of what human beings do as individuals. It is the basis for dignity. It is the basis for freedom. Individual expression of their beliefs about life and death and life after death, in some cases, through their religion. This is then seen throughout their culture. It's absolutely impossible for it to be separate from their culture.

"However in a number of countries around the world, governments and individuals within societies, even in democratic ones, try to break people of their beliefs. Right now we see it in the U.S. Catholic conference of bishops trying to be broken of their belief that life begins at the conception, that they have conscientious objection based on their religious belief and they cannot provide abortion drugs to the people they give health care plans to. They're trying to be broken, and this is a violation of religious freedom.

"I think it's important for people to understand that there's a spectrum when it comes to religious freedom - a spectrum that occurs in Japan and in different count in Europe. Where people can't wear religious symbols or garb, where Sikh or Muslim students actually choose to not attend school because the government has passed a law where they can't wear religious clothing or attire in those schools. So school children are denied their religious freedom rights."

Reporting and advocating for specific groups of victims, a challenge

By Willy Fautré, Human Rights Without Frontiers

HRWF (20.07.2012) - A human rights organization is expected to defend victims of violations of their rights which are guaranteed by the laws of their country or by international instruments when the national laws are failing to comply with international law or are not implemented.

Conscientious objectors to military service in South Korea

In South Korea, around 700 Jehovah's Witnesses are permanently in prison for about one year because they refuse to carry out military service. No non-JW is concerned by this problem. There is no law providing for a civilian service.

Members of the European Parliament were approached by this religious movement to raise this issue in the framework of the Human Rights Dialogue EU - Korean Peninsula. While they recognized that the problem was real, they were reluctant in supporting the claims of members of a religious movement which is the object of social hostility.

Some years ago, our organization decided to take up this issue. We organized a fact-finding mission in South Korea; we met and interviewed former prisoners; we visited the military prison where conscientious objectors were then detained and talked with them as well as with the authorities of the penitentiary institution; we had a meeting with the lawyers of the objectors; we had appointments with the National Commission for Human Rights, with several members of the Parliament, with journalists and with local human rights NGOs. Though, the Ministry of Defence and the Ministry of Justice ignored our requests for meetings.

We published a 250-page report in English and in Korean that is a reference document on this issue and that is used by the lawyers of conscientious objectors, local and foreign human rights NGOs, namely at the United Nations.

Change of religion under coercion in Japan

In the last 40 years, a huge number of adults who converted to the Unification Church and Jehovah's Witnesses in Japan were abducted by their families, confined during long periods and submitted under constraint to so-called "exit counseling" with the purpose of de-conversion.

Japanese politicians, the police and the judicial authorities have systematically declared that these were "family matters". All known complaints filed jointly against abducting parents and/or exit counselors have been declared ineligible for criminal proceedings by prosecutors. Moreover, civil society in Japan and the international human rights community have always ignored this long-standing problem.

In 2010-2012, our organization has collected testimonies and data coming from various reliable sources that confirm the long-standing and persistent, though declining, existence of the kidnappings for the purpose of forced conversion: a well-known investigation journalist, a former member of the Diet, abducted converts to the movement of Jehovah's Witnesses and the Unification Church, abducting parents, lawyers, psychologists, Japanese and foreign scholars in religious studies. Known opponents to these two religious minorities were contacted for meetings but failed to answer for unknown reasons.

The purpose of our investigation was not a research work about these two religious minorities or all the facets of the kidnapping, deprivation of freedom and religious de-conversion under coercion. Our purpose was two-fold and quite focused:

- collecting evidence showing that change of religion under coercion in Japan was a reality in a number of cases;
- highlighting the failure of Japan to fulfill its duty to protect its citizens and to prosecute those responsible of kidnapping, deprivation of freedom and change of religion under constraint.

Our report has reached its two objectives and more than six months after its publication our organization has not received any counter-argument denying the reality of change of religion under coercion as well as the Japanese state's failure to protect its citizens against this practice.

Conclusions

Defending the rights of adult individuals belonging to a religious community duly registered as a legal entity that is a victim of social hostility is always a risky operation but remains a necessity. Human rights organizations may not on such grounds exclude from their agenda the protection of certain categories of citizens and must go on reminding UN member states of their obligations and commitments.

All our reports are in the public domain and their findings can be used by the international community.

Final cult fugitive from 1995 nerve gas attack on Tokyo subway caught at comic-book café

Associated Press (14.06.2012) - His trail cold for years, the last fugitive suspected in a doomsday cult's deadly nerve gas attack on Tokyo's subways in 1995 was caught at a comic book cafe Friday, closing a chapter on Japan's worst terrorist attack.

He had altered his appearance and reportedly used a fake name and avoided meeting people to evade arrest, but Katsuya Takahashi admitted who he was when approached by police at the cafe in downtown Tokyo.

The former bodyguard for the Aum Shinrikyo cult leader, Takahashi had been on Japan's most wanted list for years for his suspected participation in the sarin gas attack that killed 13 people and injured about 6,000, shattering Japan's long-held sense of safety.

According to media reports, he worked for a construction company and avoided capture for years by using fake names, wearing a surgical mask on the job and seeking assignments that didn't involve meeting people.

The manhunt heated up after the June 3 arrest of another cult fugitive, Naoko Kikuchi, who reportedly lived with Takahashi for a time and had information about him. Thousands of officers hunted for Takahashi across the capital, handing out fresh photos of him and monitoring transportation hubs to keep him from escaping.

Takahashi disappeared from his job after Kikuchi's arrest, but an employee at the comic book cafe where he was spotted told a TV talk show Friday that he had visited the shop several times recently.

A cafe employee recognized Takahashi and called police, a Tokyo police spokeswoman said on condition of anonymity, citing department rules. Police arrested him on suspicion of murder, she said.

TV footage showed a huge crowd outside the cafe, trying to glimpse the last cult fugitive. Public broadcaster NHK showed a thin, bespectacled Takahashi being pushed into a police car.

The 54-year-old's appearance has changed greatly — in particular, his trademark bushy eyebrows have become much thinner. So police had to wait while his fingerprints were verified. He was arrested after being taken to a nearby police station, then transferred to Tokyo police headquarters for interrogation, police said.

Takahashi told police that he was only following the orders of higher-ups but not fully aware of the purpose, reports said.

The manhunt was one of the longest ever in Japan. Nobuko Shigenobu, a former Red Army extremist, was on the run for 26 years from 1974 until her arrest in 2000.

The Aum cult had amassed an arsenal of chemical, biological and conventional weapons in anticipation of an apocalyptic showdown with the government. Top cultists sometimes used illegal drugs and electric shocks to brainwash followers with apocalyptic teachings. Police reportedly found about a dozen Aum textbooks in Takahashi's bag later Friday in a coin-operated locker, and plan to examine whether he is still controlled by the cult teachings.

Masaki Kito, a lawyer and a long-time Aum watcher, said Takahashi's arrest and investigation could provide a fuller picture of the Aum cult's crimes.

"The case has never been fully resolved," Kito said in one of the TV talk shows that were dominated by news of Takahashi's arrest. "He was a last piece of a jigsaw puzzle."

Nearly 200 cult members have been convicted in the 1995 attack and dozens of other crimes. Thirteen, including cult guru Shoko Asahara, are on death row.

Police have been criticized for a series of bunglings in the investigation. They were aware that there was something ominous about the group, which had a highly guarded commune at the foot of Mt. Fuji, but they could not prevent the sarin attack. A near-fatal shooting of the chief of National Police Agency at the time, in which an Aum member was suspected, closed unresolved in 2010 due to a statute of limitations.

Takahashi had been Asahara's bodyguard, and authorities say he was assigned to the cult's "intelligence ministry" in charge of plotting attacks and coverup schemes. He allegedly helped one of the members who released sarin on one of the subway lines run away from the scene. He is also suspected in a 1995 cult-related kidnapping-murder, as well as a mail bomb that injured a Tokyo city employee.

Police had come close to capturing Takahashi and Kikuchi in 1996. They had traced them to an apartment in Tokorozawa city, just north of Tokyo, but lost them just before raiding the hideout.

Takahashi disappeared for many years, but the recent arrests of the other two fugitives helped police get back on his trail. Makoto Hirata, 47, charged in the 1995 kidnapping-murder as well as the subway attack, surrendered to police on New Year's Eve. Kikuchi, 40, was arrested earlier this month after she was spotted in Sagami-hara city, 30 kilometers (20 miles) southwest of Tokyo. She is accused of helping produce the deadly sarin.

Kikuchi reportedly told police that she and Takahashi moved to an apartment together in Kawasaki, just south of Tokyo, in 1997, each using an alias. Kikuchi left the apartment five years ago but Takahashi remained until last year, when he moved to a company dorm in the same city, according to NHK.

He began working at a construction company around 2004 under the name of Shinya Sakurai. He quit in 2008 but returned last October, media reports said. His former boss, whose name was not released, said Takahashi was often wearing a surgical mask, and he asked for assignments that didn't require meeting people.

The day after Kikuchi's arrest, Takahashi reportedly called his boss, saying he needed a week off because his relatives were dying. He then dropped by a credit union to withdraw some 2.3 million yen (\$29,000) in cash, bought a travel bag and disappeared.

Images of the fugitive were captured by security cameras, parts of which were released to the media. He wore different clothes almost at each location, in an apparent attempt to avoid detection.

The Aum cult once had 10,000 members in Japan and claimed another 30,000 in Russia. It still has hundreds of members. The cult is under police surveillance and its current leaders have publicly disavowed Asahara.

Tokyo cult attack suspect relieved by her arrest

By Mari Yamaguchi

Associated Press (04.06.2012) - A woman wanted for 17 years for allegedly helping to produce the deadly nerve gas used in a 1995 attack on Tokyo subways said she feels relief at her arrest because she doesn't have to hide her identity anymore, police said Monday.

Naoko Kikuchi is a former member of the Aum Shinrikyo cult that released the nerve gas sarin in Tokyo's subways in 1995, killing 13 people and injuring more than 6,000. The cult had amassed an arsenal of chemical, biological and conventional weapons in anticipation of an apocalyptic showdown with the government.

Police on Sunday arrested Kikuchi, 40, after she was spotted in Sagamihara city, 30 kilometers (20 miles) southwest of Tokyo, where she had been living since 2010. She admitted who she was when officers approached her.

She was one of two remaining cult members wanted as murder suspects in the case.

Kikuchi has admitted to helping in the sarin production, but told investigators that she didn't know at that time what the substance was, a Tokyo Metropolitan Police spokesman said on condition of anonymity, citing department rules.

She also admitted to using an alias and moving every few years to avoid detection.

"I had to hide my identity and used an alias all these years while I was on the run. Now I'm arrested and I don't have to do that anymore. I feel relieved," the police quoted her as saying.

Investigators had to verify her identity by fingerprints and a mole on the right cheek as her appearance had changed substantially from the way she looked in wanted posters due to weight loss over the years.

A man claiming to have lived with Kikuchi for the past six years turned himself in Monday, the police spokesman said.

Hiroto Takahashi, 41, said the couple moved to an apartment in Sagamihara in 2010, police said. He was arrested on suspicion of hiding a suspect.

Police searched the apartment for clues about Kikuchi's 17-year hideout and that may lead to the one remaining fugitive, Katsuya Takahashi, 54, who is not related to Kikuchi's partner.

Nearly 200 members of the Aum Shinrikyo cult have been convicted in the gas attack and dozens of other crimes. Thirteen, including cult guru Shoko Asahara, are on death row.

Makoto Hirata, charged in a 1995 cult-related kidnapping-murder, as well as the subway attack, surrendered to police on New Year's Eve, ending his 17-year life on the run and stunning the nation.

The cult, renamed Aleph, once had 10,000 members in Japan and claimed another 30,000 in Russia. It still has hundreds of members. The cult is under police surveillance and its new leaders have publicly disavowed Asahara.

Ex-AUM cult member Inoue questioned over Hirata's role in 1995 case

The Manichi Daily News (05.01.2012) - Police have questioned former AUM Shinrikyo cult member Yoshihiro Inoue, who is on death row, as part of their investigation into a case involving another former leading member who turned himself in to police over the weekend after almost 17 years on the run, investigative sources said Thursday.

Inoue, 42, was questioned on a voluntary basis as the police investigated the role played by Makoto Hirata, 46, in the 1995 abduction of a Tokyo notary office clerk and his subsequent death. Inoue was put in charge of that crime on AUM founder Shoko Asahara's instructions.

Hirata was quoted by the sources as telling the police he was instructed by Inoue to drive a car in the abduction case involving the notary clerk, Kiyoshi Kariya, 68. Meanwhile, he also told his lawyer he did not know about the abduction plan.

The police are expected also to question other convicted former AUM members, the sources said.

Also on Thursday, National Police Agency Commissioner General Yutaka Katagiri admitted at a news conference that the police's turning away of Hirata when he first appeared at the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department headquarters to turn himself in on Saturday night was "inappropriate."

Hirata later went to a police station nearby in downtown Tokyo.

It was also learned that Hirata was in possession of over 30,000 yen worth of prepaid highway toll cards when he showed up at the police station. The toll card system was abolished in March 2006, but the police are analyzing card records for clues to where and how he had been hiding.

According to court records and other sources, Asahara ordered his followers to abduct Kariya to discover the whereabouts of Kariya's sister who had been in hiding after she tried to leave the cult.

A group of AUM members led by Inoue kidnapped Kariya by car and Hirata allegedly played the role of watchman in another vehicle that followed. He is also believed to have been involved in cleaning up fingerprints and bloodstains in the car that carried Kariya.
