

# Massacre of Japanese school-children provokes questioning of society

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Few events have shocked Japan as much as the June 8 massacre at Ikeda Elementary, an elite primary school attached to Osaka Kyoiku University. In the course of a 15-minute rampage, 37-year-old Mamoru Takuma fatally stabbed eight children and seriously wounded 13 others and two teachers.

According to police investigators, Takuma entered a classroom where six and seven year-olds were taking lessons and randomly started to stab children with a 15-centimetre long knife. As the children tried to flee, he chased them down the hall. Several children were stabbed many times in the back, throat and stomach. One girl died from injuries to her chest and windpipe. Tetsuro Kobayashi, one of the surgeons who treated the victims, commented on the brutal and indiscriminate nature of the attack. "They were stabbed in the neck with brute force and died instantly. It was clear from their wounds that the man did not hesitate."

It was the second largest mass murder in Japan, exceeded only by the fatalities caused by the release of sarin gas into the Tokyo subway by members of the Aum religious sect. The fact the victims were young children heightened the sense of calamity.

The tragedy was not an aberration, however. It follows in the wake of an escalating number of brutal murders and assaults during the 1990s. Just 18 months ago in Kyoto, a man stabbed a seven-year-old boy in a schoolyard. Last year, a 15-year-old boy stabbed six of his neighbours while they slept, killing three. In the aftermath of the Ikeda killings, a widespread discussion has broken out in Japan as to why, when until recently the country had been relatively free of such incidents and had among the lowest homicide rates in the world.

In trying to understand what is truly a horrific and senseless crime, attention has inevitably turned to an examination of Takuma's life and the circumstances that led him to carry out such an act.

Takuma himself has given contradictory explanations for his actions. At the time of his arrest he told police: "I was fed up with everything, I wanted to be put to death." He reportedly told police that he tried to kill himself several times but was not successful. By targeting children he thought he would definitely be given the death sentence. It has been also suggested in the media that he may have targeted an elite school because he had a grudge against society.

Later, he vehemently denied having been at the school. He told his lawyer: "I heard a voice in my head telling me to die. Someone attacked and injured me in front of Hankyu [railway] station, and I resisted with a kitchen knife." On July 18 he reverted back to his original story, stating: "I thought I would certainly be sentenced to die if I killed many children of the elite and intelligent."

Whether the massacre was subjectively motivated by a desire to die or the result of a paranoid delusion, Takuma's biography shows that he was a deeply disturbed man whose financial, health and emotional circumstances were generating pressures he was incapable of dealing with.

Takuma had a history of mental problems and violent behaviour and had been diagnosed as a schizophrenic last April. He had been hospitalised three times since then, most recently for 24 hours from May 22 to 23. His father told the media that he had asked a psychiatric hospital to evaluate his son 18 years ago but nothing was done at the time.

Takuma dropped out of high school and joined the Air Self-Defence Force but was released after one year of a three-year enlistment for unstated reasons. By the late 1990s, Takuma was exhibiting signs of serious instability. He had become addicted to tranquilizers, prescribed to treat pains resulting from a back injury, and had been unable to secure steady employment amid the highest levels of unemployment in Japan in postwar history. In

December 1997 his wife filed for divorce after just nine months of marriage and he was arrested in 1998 for assaulting her.

In April 1999, he lost a job as a maintenance worker at a primary school after he was suspected of putting tranquilizers into teachers' tea. He was arrested for the offence but not prosecuted on the grounds of mental illness. He was placed into a psychiatric hospital but released after a month.

There has traditionally been a social stigma attached to mental illness in Japan, with people expected to persevere without clinical help. The limited facilities have been stretched in recent years because of an increase in psychiatric conditions—many triggered by rising economic insecurity. This has placed pressure on hospitals to process patients faster and to release them back into the community on prescribed drugs without any ongoing program of psychotherapy.

Lacking support, Takuma's condition deteriorated even further over the following two years. The day he carried out the attack he was due to appear before the Osaka District Public Prosecutors Office on charges of assaulting a hotel employee while working as a taxi driver in October last year. Since then he had been unemployed. He owed money on his car and was about to be evicted from his apartment for being a month behind in the rent. In a country with only minimal social security for marginalised layers like Takuma, he faced the prospect of joining Japan's rapidly growing homeless population.

On the morning of the attack he took 10 times the prescribed amount of his medication. In a totally disorientated state he drove to the nearby Ikeda Elementary, where he was later arrested.

Takuma's fate and actions are so clearly related to complex social questions, ranging from the social crisis facing millions of people due to Japan's 10-year economic slump through to the treatment of the mentally ill, that it cannot be avoided. The attack on Ikeda Elementary has not been reduced to the banal explanation often given in similar cases in Japan and internationally—that Takuma was inherently evil.

Some commentators in Japan have pointed to underlying social causes. Masao Omuru, a criminal psychiatrist at Nihon University, told the press: "Socio-political and economic instability trigger psychological instability or uncertainty, and all this, I believe, is contributing a great deal to the rising brutal crime. Japan is in a state of social breakdown." Other sociologists have pointed to the strict and competitive nature of Japanese

society as a cause for the increase in violence, particularly under conditions of widespread unemployment, limited opportunities and growing wealth inequality.

Within the political establishment and the media, however, the debate has largely focused on a tougher "law-and-order" approach. Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi declared after the incident: "The safe society is crumbling and this is a significant incident. We are determined to do whatever is necessary, including ensuring safety at schools and providing care for those that get caught up in this." His education minister suggested deploying security guards in the schools and restricting public access to their facilities.

Teachers are being enrolled in self-defence classes and armed with weapons such as tear gas canisters and piercing noise alarms. In one bizarre incident, a school carried out a "massacre drill," involving a male teacher bursting into a fifth grade classroom wearing a mask and carrying an iron rod. One child was so traumatised by the experience she could not stop vomiting and had to be hospitalised.

Legislation has been proposed to permit the preventative detention of mentally ill people deemed dangerous to themselves or others. Such an approach was rejected in the early 1980s as an infringement on human rights but has been resurrected by the ruling Liberal Democratic Party to placate concerns over the Ikeda incident and other expressions of social crisis. Even as Takuma undergoes psychiatric evaluation to determine whether he is fit to stand trial, parliamentary discussions are underway about abolishing laws that prevent the mentally ill being subject to criminal liability.

These responses are those of a political establishment and an economic order bereft of any answers to the problems afflicting society. Koizumi's policy is to deregulate the economy and place even greater numbers of people at the mercy of the unfettered operation of the capitalist market. Admitting the connection between the rise of violent crime and mental instability and social ills such as unemployment, homelessness and financial stress would cut across this agenda.



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