# Starvation tragedy underlines social deprivation in Japan

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On February 20, three bodies were discovered by the police in an apartment in Saitama city, just north of Tokyo. They were believed to be an elderly couple in their 60s and their son in his 30s. Each had apparently died of starvation, two months earlier. The rent had not been paid for six months and electricity and gas had been turned off.

There was no food or money in the apartment. Water bottles were found next to the three emaciated bodies, suggesting they survived only on water in their final days. Late last year, the wife had apparently tried to borrow some money from a neighboring couple, themselves in their 70s, saying her husband had become unable to work because of his lower back problems. However, the family seems not to have applied for welfare, nor were they registered as municipal residents.

Many commentators in Japan suggested the cause of the tragedy was that Japanese people, this family included, willingly choose not to seek welfare, out of supposed pride or shame. This covers up the real social roots of the lonely deaths.

For decades, the ruling elite in Japan has promoted the notion that workers should not, as a matter of virtue, depend on the government, creating a useful social stigma toward welfare. But the elite has had no qualms in taking huge sums to bail out the banks and corporations in the past two decades. This is the major cause of the rising public debt in Japan, now more than twice its gross domestic product (GDP), a growth accelerated by the global financial crisis since 2008.

Only 0.2 percent of GDP goes to public assistance to the poor, less than half of the inadequate 0.5 percent in the US, while social need is sharply rising.

With the worsening fiscal situation, local governments are under extreme pressure from Tokyo to reduce the number of welfare recipients. Around 1.5 million households receive welfare, double the total from 10 years ago and three times more than 20 years ago. In fact, this is a post-war high, surpassing the previous peak when the welfare system was first introduced in 1951.

Welfare applicants are required to sell any property of value, such as real estate and vehicles, even jewelry. They must also submit to intrusive and arbitrary rules, which vary with different local governments, which are meant to humiliate and intimidate people into forgoing their benefits. This application process is repeated every fortnight, accompanied by new reports to the municipal authorities, and new abuses from the clerks.

The systemic complicity of the central and local governments in bullying people off welfare was brought to light in 2007. A man in his 50s—until recently a welfare recipient—starved to death in the city of Kitakyushu, after being forced to submit a false report claiming he was no longer in need of welfare. It later emerged that public servants had been instructed to deliberately mislead applicants as to their eligibility and turn them away, or to intimidate those already receiving benefits into quitting. Promotions were tied to the number of people cut off. Moreover, Kitakyushu had been long-praised by the welfare ministry as a model for all local governments. Other municipal workers had been sent to Kitakyushu to learn its methods.

People who are left without income are unable to forge any link with society at all, often not even with their closest relatives. In the first two months of this year, Japan has seen many other instances of isolated, lonely deaths. In an extreme case, a mummified body of an old man was discovered in Tokyo in mid-2010, more than 30 years after he died. The phenomenon is referred to as *kodokushi*, or literally "lonely death".

A 2011 Ritsumeikan University thesis researching the origins and usage of the term found that it entered wide circulation after the 1995 Kobe earthquake, in the aftermath of which more than 400 displaced persons died unnoticed of starvation, illness or cold.

Some 2,200 people over the age of 65 died *kodokushi* in 2008. A Cabinet Office research paper in 2010 found that 43 percent of elderly people felt the prospect of *kodokushi* either extremely or somewhat close to them personally. In a program on "muen shakai"—roughly "disconnected society"—the public broadcaster NHK reported in 2010 that there were around 32,000 deaths annually where nobody appeared to claim the body, or the deceased could not be identified.

Commentators in Japan often point to an "aging population", blaming the supposedly huge pension bill, and a smaller workforce, for declining living standards. In fact, the declining birth rate is bound up with rising poverty among working families.

According to an Organisation of Economic Cooperation Development (OECD) report in 2007: "Income inequality and relative poverty among the working-age population in Japan have risen to levels above the OECD average."

In particular, the OECD noted: "While poor households in Japan receive a low share of transfers, they bear a high tax burden relative to other OECD countries ... Indeed, Japan is the only OECD country in which the rate of child poverty has been consistently higher after taxes and transfers than before." As a result, the report noted, 98 percent of the children living in poverty were in working families, half of them with at least two working earners.

The chief source of the growing poverty is the gradual destruction of the major concession to the working class in the post-war period—life-long employment. Non-regular workers rose from 20 percent of the workforce in 1990 to 35 percent in 2011. On average, they earned just 40 percent of the pay of the regular employees.

Meanwhile, at the other end of the social pole, *Forbes* reports that in 2010 "Japan's 40 richest are worth a combined $87 billion, up from $69.5 billion" in 2009. The wealthiest four tycoons "accounted for two-thirds of that gain" and "five out of the top six added more than a billion dollars to their fortunes," in one year alone.

The tragic starvation deaths in Saitama recall what Thomas Paine wrote at the end of the eighteenth century: "The contrast of affluence and wretchedness continually meeting and offending the eye, is like dead and living bodies chained together." How true these words ring in modern Japan.