

Bomb detonates at Japan's war shrine

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An explosion occurred in a restroom at Japan's Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo during a national holiday a week ago. While no-one was injured in the blast, the incident highlights the controversial nature of the shrine. No individual or group claimed responsibility, but the site has been the target of attempted attacks in the past.

The shrine is an infamous symbol of Japanese militarism, where those who died in Japan's wars, primarily World War II, are symbolically interred, including 14 class-A war criminals, secretly added in 1978.

The explosion took place around 10 a.m. last Monday near the shrine's south gate while people at the shrine were marking the annual Niinamesai Shinto festival, a traditional harvest celebration. The shrine's main hall was closed following the blast. The ceiling and walls of the restroom were damaged and a small fire broke out, which was extinguished before firefighters arrived.

The authorities apparently believe that a single individual placed the bomb, not an organized group. Video footage reportedly captured a man entering the area near the bathroom with a paper bag and later leaving without it shortly before the explosion. A timing device, wiring and batteries were found at the scene, along with four items resembling pipe bombs in the ceiling.

The Yasukuni Shrine has long been a rallying point for right-wing Japanese politicians. On October 20, 70 lawmakers including Katsunobu Kato, head of the new Citizen Engagement Ministry, visited the shrine for Japan's autumn festival. Representatives from the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and the opposition Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) were in attendance.

A few days earlier, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe sent a ritual offering—a masakaki tree—while two more cabinet members, Internal Affairs and Communications

Minister Sanae Takaichi and Justice Minister Mitsuhide Iwaki, visited the shrine.

Given the symbolism of the Yasukuni Shrine, it is possible the bombing was a misguided and essentially reactionary protest against the militarist agenda being pushed by Abe.

Following closely behind the attacks in Paris by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, the Japanese government and security apparatus will undoubtedly use the incident to push for more police-state measures at home. "Terrorism should not occur in Japan," Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga said last Tuesday. "We will conduct strict warning and surveillance activities in order to ensure public safety."

Until 2001, no post-World War II prime minister visited the Yasukuni Shrine in an official capacity, except for Yasuhiro Nakasone in 1985. This changed when Junichiro Koizumi, prime minister between 2001 and 2006, made six visits. Abe was the next sitting premier to go to the memorial, doing so in December 2013.

There is widespread opposition in Japan to Abe's drive to rearm and cast off the constitutional constraints that formally prevent it from again going to war to reassert its imperialist interests, as it did in World War II.

Throughout the summer, numerous and at times large protests took place in Tokyo and throughout the country, comprised of workers, farmers, and students, calling for the scrapping of legislation that was ultimately pushed through the Japanese legislature in September. The new laws permit the government to dispatch the military without a special law being passed.

In the name of "collective self-defense," the bills also allow Japan to militarily support allies—in other words, to take part in US-led wars of aggression in the Asia-Pacific and around the world. The laws codify the Abe

government's "reinterpretation" of Article 9 of the post-World War II constitution, which formally renounced war forever.

The shrine is also a focal point for anti-Japanese sentiment elsewhere in Asia, particularly in China and South Korea. Both Beijing and Seoul regularly express anger when Japanese politicians visit the shrine, whipping up anti-Japanese hostility in order to distract from worsening economic and social conditions domestically. In 2011, a Chinese man attempted to set fire to the shrine before fleeing to South Korea. In 2013, a South Korean man was arrested for entering the shrine's compound with flammable materials.

More than 2.4 million individuals are interred at the shrine, having been killed in Japanese wars dating back to the Meiji Restoration in 1868. The building is not simply a memorial for Japan's war dead, as Japanese nationalists and their apologists claim. It is a symbol of Japanese aggression before and during World War II, when it was used as a focus to encourage emperor worship and militarism.

An associated museum has military displays and literature that downplay Japanese war crimes such as the Nanjing massacre, during which the Japanese army murdered as many as 300,000 captured Chinese soldiers and civilians in 1937. It refers to World War II as the Greater East Asia War, claiming that the war was meant to liberate Asia from Western imperialism and create an Asian "co-prosperity sphere."

After World War II, right-wing politicians attempted to rally support for and pass a law that would extend state protection to the Yasukuni Shrine. Such a law would have enabled politicians and the emperor to worship there during festivals. Between 1969 and 1974, the ruling Liberal Democratic Party attempted to pass such a law on five occasions, but failed each time.

The Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) and other opposition parties have sought to capitalize on the widespread popular opposition to Japan's remilitarization, but the DPJ has no fundamental differences with the LDP.

The visits by Japanese prime ministers over the past 15 years and the overall turn to militarization make clear that Japan's militarists and sections of the political and corporate establishment will continue to use the Yasukuni Shrine as a rallying point to try to build support for future wars of aggression.



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