

Knife attack in Japan leaves 19 disabled people dead

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A terrible attack in Japan by a disturbed individual on disabled people early Tuesday morning has left 19 people dead and a further 26 injured, half of them critically. Satoshi Uematsu, 26, broke into a centre for people with disabilities around 2 am, tied up the staff and then methodically stabbed the residents, before leaving and handing himself in to police.

The deadly attack has produced widespread shock in Japan where the homicide rate is low and multiple murders rare. No serious attempt, however, has been made in the Japanese or international media to probe any of the underlying social and political causes of the killing spree.

Uematsu was a former employee of the disabilities centre, known as Tsukui Yamayuri-en. He was forced to resign in February after he sent a letter to the speaker of the lower house of parliament advocating euthanasia for the disabled. According to the national broadcaster, NHK, he threatened to kill hundreds of people with disabilities “for the sake of Japan” and called for legislation to allow the lives of the severely disabled to be ended.

“I will carry out a massacre without harming staff,” Uematsu reportedly wrote. “I can kill 470 disabled people. My goal is a world where people with multiple disabilities who have extreme difficulty living at home or being active in society can be euthanised with the consent of their guardians.”

Uematsu made clear that Tsukui Yamayuri-en would be his first target, and that he would carry out the attack at night, when fewer staff were on duty.

After hearing about the letter, the welfare centre’s director told Uematsu that he was not an appropriate person to work at the facility and obtained his agreement to resign. The young man was involuntarily committed to a psychiatric hospital, where he was

diagnosed with a marijuana-induced psychosis and delusional disorder, but allowed to leave just 12 days later.

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe yesterday issued a perfunctory statement offering “condolences from the bottom of my heart” to the families of the victims and said his government would “do everything to get to the bottom of the truth.” Other politicians at the national and prefectural level followed suit.

While nothing suggests that yesterday’s attack was in any way connected to terrorism, the multiple murders will undoubtedly be used, as has been the case in recent incidents in France and Germany, to justify a further bolstering of the state apparatus in Japan.

Already, various commentators are calling for tough law-and-order measures. Nobuo Komiya, a Rishsho University criminology professor, told Associated Press: “Japan has put an emphasis on not creating criminals, but it is reaching breaking point. Like in foreign countries, I think institutions need to develop a plan in operational management and prepare for a worst-case scenario, given that criminals are inevitably born.”

What Komiya is dismissing is the very notion that crimes, including murder, are the product of a diseased society rather than being innate to “evil individuals.”

A report on global homicide issued by the UN Office on Drugs and Crime in 2013 noted: “With no notable fluctuations, the homicide rate in Japan has decreased steadily since 1955 to reach one of the lowest levels in the world. The country’s homicide rate is associated with a stable and prosperous society with low inequality and high levels of development.”

In 2014, there were 11 times more homicides in the United States than in Japan, even though the American population is approximately three times that of Japan.

Two decades of economic slump, however, combined

with a deepening assault on living standards by successive governments have led to rising levels of social inequality, unemployment and poverty that are exacerbating social tensions. Young people in particular face an uncertain future as permanent jobs have been replaced by casual, low-paid employment.

According to the *Yomuiiri Shimbun*, Uematsu obtained work as a part-time employee at the Tsukui Yamayuri-en centre in December 2012 after quitting a job with a transportation-related company. He became a full-time worker in April 2013. The *New York Times* reported that he told the police yesterday: “I held some grudges after being forced to resign.”

The *Financial Times* explained that “care facilities in Japan have come under growing strain as the number of elderly people has risen, creating the need for a large number of carers. Wages in the sector are low and a widespread shortage of trained carers and nurses had been blamed for a rise in incidents of elderly abuse.”

A study published in 2010 by researcher Yuuka Ooka into the working conditions of staff at welfare facilities for people with disabilities found that “62 percent of workers were in the condition of high-risk mental health.”

The study noted that government “reforms” had resulted in funding cutbacks, which resulted in increased workloads. “In recent years, problems in mental health among welfare staff have been increasing in every facility, resulting in their leaving or early retirement. It is clear that the reform efforts made the staff exhausted and sometimes sick. This trend in Japan has been a serious issue among facilities for people with disabilities.”

What drove Uematsu to murder disabled people remains unclear. He was clearly a deeply disturbed individual whose mental instability may well have been compounded by poor working conditions and the lack of assistance for staff members. There are some hints that he might have been attracted to extreme right-wing groups. The *New York Times*, for instance, noted that he had been following “several right-wing accounts” on Twitter.

The Abe government, in particular, has given succour to right-wing and fascistic organisations in Japan through its efforts to remilitarise Japan, integrate the country into US-led wars and promote virulent Japanese nationalism. This agenda only encourages a

climate in which violence is seen as normal and that finds its most reactionary expression in the extreme right.



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