

Gruesome murder case in Japan reflects social alienation and despair

Gary Alvernia
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Last month the Japanese public was shocked by the discovery of nine brutally-mutilated corpses in an apartment in suburban Tokyo in what was described as the worst case of serial killing in recent years. A 27-year-old youth, Takahiro Shiraishi, has admitted guilt after being named as the prime suspect.

The murders, labelled the “Zama killings” after the Tokyo suburb, have been portrayed as an isolated and inexplicable episode. Whatever Shiraishi’s exact motivations, this gruesome crime reflects the social disaffection and political alienation felt by broad layers of Japanese youth.

The bodies of the victims found in Shiraishi’s apartment were dismembered and stuffed in ice coolers, toolboxes, and rubbish bags. The strong stench was noticed by neighbours, who notified municipal authorities. However, it was only when a brother of one of the victims discovered Internet exchanges between Shiraishi and his sister that the police arrested him.

Shiraishi has been charged with first-degree murder as well as destruction of evidence. His alleged victims included eight women and a man, all aged between 15 and 26 years old. By his admission, starting in August this year, he apparently contacted youth who had expressed a desire to end their own lives on so-called “suicide pages” on Twitter. He offered to assist their suicide, along with the promise that they could die together in a “suicide pact.” Upon arriving at his apartment, the victims were murdered and their belongings and money stolen.

Shiraishi has reportedly expressed no other motivation than theft. If the allegations are true, he is deeply troubled with scant regard for human life. Prior to the killings, Shiraishi had no criminal record, and was described by family and neighbours as a quiet, unassuming young man. After graduating high school,

he worked casual jobs at a grocery store but then became a recruiter for a local brothel.

In its reporting, the Japanese media has been quick to focus solely on the grisly nature of the murders, sensationalizing every detail and ignoring any broader examination of the social causes of this tragedy. The only measure proposed thus far is to restrict access of Japanese youths to the “suicide websites” and greater censorship.

Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshishide Suga rapidly announced that the government would clamp down on “websites propagating suicide content.” Seiko Noda, minister of internal affairs and communications emphasised that efforts would be made to close any supposed loopholes in Internet regulations allowing such web sites to exist.

Amid the media outrage over web sites promoting suicidality, the question is never raised: Why are so many Japanese youth seeking to commit suicide?

Suicide in Japan is a serious social problem. Even though recent years have seen a decrease in the rate, the country still recorded over 21,000 cases of suicide in 2016. By population, Japan has the sixth highest suicide rate in the world.

Suicide is the number one cause of death for children and youth, with surveys revealing that roughly a quarter of high school students have suffered from severe depression and thought about suicide at one point in their lives.

Japanese media abounds with articles on individuals committing suicide due to overwork, succumbing to incredible pressures in the academic and schooling system, and serious difficulties for young people in finding friends and romantic partners.

While the idea of an honourable suicide stemming from feudal times still has a cultural sway, it is

completely inadequate to explain the suicide rate. The persistently high rates of depression and suicide are a reflection of widespread social despair, hopelessness and alienation from society at large.

The descriptions of Shiraishi's victims are quite telling. They came from diverse backgrounds, ranging from private high school students to a divorced single mother, government public servants to casual labourers.

Deep social alienation is also expressed in the rising numbers of *hikikomori*—young people who adopt a reclusive life and in the most extreme cases refuse to leave their rooms. An estimated half million youth are categorised as *hikikomori*. They are generally ignored by the media or treated as mentally ill. For many, however, it is a reaction to a sick society that they want no part of.

The social stresses are only compounded by the lack of assistance. For those in need, public mental health services, which have always been limited, have become increasingly stretched in recent years by budget cuts and increased demand.

The most acute expression of a diseased society are crimes such as the Zama killings, which contrary to the media, are not an isolated incidents. Since the early 1990s, there have been an increasing number of similarly random and gruesome murder cases, often involving young people with clear psychological disturbances.

* A month prior to the Zama murders, a 32 year old man was arrested for killing his wife and five children by setting fire to their apartment, without any apparent reason.

* Just last year a young disability-care worker killed 19 and wounded 26 disabled patients in a knife attack. In admitting to the crime, he said he wanted to free people of the burdens of their disabilities.

* In 2008, a young man drove a truck into a crowd in downtown Tokyo, killing eight people. When questioned, he expressed feelings of worthlessness and suicidality.

The rise of the various symptoms of social distress and political alienation correspond with the onset of the long period of Japan's economic stagnation that has given rise to an end of lifelong employment and widespread casualisation, lower wages and greater economic insecurity, and a deepening gulf between rich and poor.

The entire political establishment from the right-wing Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) government of Shinzo Abe to the various opposition parties is committed to the agenda of austerity at home and support for the US-led war drive against North Korea and China. The bleak future facing young people not only in Japan is undoubtedly contributing to the various symptoms of social disease—from suicide to violent crime.

The author recommends:

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[23 June 2008]

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[27 July 2016]



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