

Illustration: Kato Susumu

THE Japanese word *yakuza*, which refers to members or gangster organizations, is used on a daily basis even in Southeast Asia with trepidation. Due to the strict crackdown by the police and the changing times, transformations are becoming apparent even in the world of Japan's outlaw community. We can get a glimpse of the current situation of the community in the "Police White Paper" compiled in 2006 by the National Police Agency (NPA).

In 2005, the number of constituent and quasi-constituent members of organized crime groups came to 86,300. Isolated as a result of the 1992 Organized Crime Group Countermeasures Law, at one time membership dropped to less than 80,000. However, over the 8-year period since 1996, that number has slowly increased and, despite a dip in 2005 the number is approaching that of the era before the law went into effect.

The largest of the groups is the Yamaguchi-gumi, which has over 20,000 members. Combining with the next two largest, the Sumiyoshi-kai and Inagawa-kai, the three groups account for some 73% of the total *yakuza* membership. Similar to the world of finance and politics, an oligopoly is progressing steadily.



Japan's Gangsters Change with the Times

By Matsunaga Tsutomu

The *yakuza* groups' main sources of income used to include the buying and selling of stimulant drugs, extortion, gambling and unauthorized bookmaking operations which privately issued betting slips for public-sector horse/auto races. Crimes based on these traditional methods of securing funds are on the decrease. They have been replaced by expansion into industrial waste disposal businesses, money lending and the construction sector.

The groups are also establishing connections with international crime organizations. This is evidenced by the division of roles carried out by a group of thieves composed of 58 Chinese and Japanese who were recently arrested. The Japanese members of the gang, employing personal contacts and knowledge of the locales, would arrange a base for the crimes and necessary vehicles and drivers. The Chinese members would then employ various *modi operandi*, including picking locks with simple tools in order to gain entrance to condominiums where they would steal bank passbooks and personal seals. The Japanese members would then arrange for someone of the same gender and approximately the same age as the real owner of each passbook to withdraw money from the bank account. This group of confederates caused some ¥580 million in damage.

Disputes between *yakuza* groups are decreasing, but confrontations are occurring between *yakuza* groups and international crime organizations. The head of a syndicate under the umbrella of the Yamaguchi-gumi ordered an armed member to shoot an Iranian member of a drug-smuggling organization. The cause of the con-

frontation was a territorial dispute over illegal drug sales.

When a policeman was shot during a battle between gangs, the Supreme Court recognized the "employer's liability" of the head of the Yamaguchi-gumi and accepted the surviving family's claim for compensation for the injury. The filing of the suit by the victims who claimed joint liability not only on the part of the actual perpetrator of the crime but the syndicate boss had the impact of striking an economic blow against *yakuza* groups.

In order to strengthen efforts to unearth drugs and firearms, the NPA has been contemplating the adoption of a system for anonymous reporting through a private organization. An incorporated foundation that has received inquiries from businesses which are trying to exclude *yakuza* groups has decided to construct an online crime organization bulletin system, which can make inquiries about *yakuza* members.

Among the factors interfering with the eradication of *yakuza* organizations, one cannot ignore the breeding ground that supports them. A storied Buddhist temple in the Kansai region, despite requests for circumspection from local police, had agreed to hold memorial services for the successive heads of the Yamaguchi-gumi. In the end, representatives of the temple were later severely criticized and ultimately resigned.

The increased polarization of Japanese society has become an issue. If the crime organizations seize upon social drop-outs as sources of personnel, then the problem of organized crime will become even more deeply rooted. **JS**

Matsunaga Tsutomu is the Assistant Deputy Director of the President's Office of Jiji Press Co., Ltd.