

Maintaining Security

– The Koban and the Neighbors Working Together –

By Matsunaga Tsutomu

TWO years ago the National Police Agency (NPA) reported some shocking figures regarding law and order in Japan. It said the number of reported criminal offenses had risen by one million cases over 10 years, from 1.74 million to 2.74 million. In the past the arrest rate was some 60%, but the figure in 2001 is a record low of 19.8%, indicating a real crisis in public order. In 2003 the increase in the occurrence of crimes was finally halted, but compared with the peaceful Showa era, the number of crimes has now doubled. Restoring Japan's peaceful society is of extreme importance for the NPA and the government.

One factor in the decline of law and order is the increasing number of crimes committed by non-Japanese. The number of citizens from abroad arrested last year exceeded 20,000, a historical high. This is 1.5 times the number of 10 years ago.

Last year's NPA White Paper introduced the true feelings of some Chinese suspects who seemed unafraid of the punishments dealt out in Japan. "Japanese prisons are clean, you can watch TV and it's easier to live there than in China." "For theft, you only get a few years, so that's endurable." "The Japanese police don't beat you." "I really want to go to the United States, but there's a danger of being shot by the

police there and the prison sentences are heavier."

One cannot be optimistic about juvenile crime either. A 12-year-old Jr. high school boy removed the clothes of a 4-year-old boy, sexually molested him and, on top of that, pushed him to his death from the top of a building. An elementary school girl fatally stabbed her classmate. Brutal crimes committed by children have become major news items almost every year. The number of arrests of juvenile offenders on a per capita basis is approaching the levels of the early 1980s, which was the worst period in the postwar era.

To improve the situation, the NPA has begun to adopt a number of measures.

The *koban* (police box) has historically exerted considerable influence in maintaining public order in Japan. The system was so successful that it was exported to Brazil and Singapore. Including residential police substations, there are over 14,000 kobans across the country. Officers from the koban visit the homes in the neighborhood, giving advice on crime prevention and listening to residents' opinions. However, due to the recent increase in the number of incidents, there are a large number of so-called "empty koban" where the officers are all out on duty.

Police authorities are endeavoring to revitalize the koban, by reinforcing its functions through increasing the number of officers and by sending out retired officers as advisors.

The authorities are also laying out plans to collaborate with local communities, such as providing information and collaborating with local volunteer groups. The website, which indicates in fine detail where thefts from vehicles, muggings and automobile accidents have occurred, is appreciated.

In Sendai city, community residents have created a "citizens' koban," which is regularly staffed. The members carry transceivers and powerful flashlights on neighborhood patrols. Crime in the area has reportedly diminished by almost 20%.

In the Tokyo metropolitan area, mailmen, newspaper deliverers and pizza deliverers are organizing crime-prevention patrols. There have even been cases where thieves have been captured by these patrols.

According to the NPA White Paper, the increase in the crime-prevention activities of a community also leads to strengthening the weakened ties within the area. The report expresses hope that the strategy of involving citizens will have results that extend beyond the reduction of crime. **JS**

Illustration: Kato Susumu



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