

ONE cannot tell the tragic tale of 70 and 80-year-old sisters without becoming angry. The two had suffered from dementia but lived a tranquil life together in a small house in Saitama prefecture. Nineteen contractors visited them one after another and got them to sign successive contracts for unnecessary termite extermination and sub-flooring dehumidification. The total construction cost ¥50 million. According to the report, the sisters were deprived of their entire savings of ¥40 million, and because they lacked another ¥7 million, their house was sold at auction.

Around Japan, dishonest salesmen are calling on elderly people who live alone, telling them, "If an earthquake hits, the pillars will collapse and the roof will fall down," and, "Harmful asbestos is used in your roofing," and deceiving people whose judgment has weakened. The damage is rapidly increasing and came to ¥22.3 billion in 2005. The Metropolitan Police Department has disclosed a company forced a total of 5,400 people to pay ¥11.5 billion in two years. The number of victims is increasing.

A single woman living alone was coerced into paying ¥15 million over a period of two months. Upon examination by a qualified



## Dishonest Salespeople Taking Advantage of the Aged Society

By *Matsunaga Tsutomu*

architect, it was discovered that 83 ventilation fans and circulation fans had been installed under her house. The house was virtually ready to hover into the air. In the home of another elderly person, the roof space had been reformed to look like a trade fair for metal reinforcement fittings.

It has not been merely a matter of house repairs. In the Chubu area, a woman suffering from dementia was coerced into buying futon on 98 separate occasions for the equivalent of ¥30 million. An 80-year-old woman in Tokyo so deeply trusted a salesman that not only did she end up paying ¥10 million for housing improvements and futon, but she was registered as an executive of his company without any mentions.

In a particularly mysterious incident, ¥18 million in cash was found discarded in an irrigation ditch in Saitama prefecture. It was later discovered that the money had been stolen from a dishonest salesman by his former girlfriend, and she had thrown the money away. When asked the reason she stated, "It was money stolen through fraud, permeated with the resentment of many people."

A company disclosed to have used illegal practices had carried out simulations with one employee playing the role of a customer and another playing that of a salesman, complete with rehearsals and coaching. Manuals were found with sections titled "selecting

quarry" and a division of labor between the "appointer," who made appointments to propose the contracts, and the "closer," who finalized the deals.

In the background of these incidents is the fact that elderly households compose more than 30% of the total households in Japan. Many of them live separately from their grown children. With the urbanization of the cities and the depopulation of rural regions, the tradition of "associating with one's neighbors," which was once a distinguishing feature of Japanese society, has diminished and the voluntary community care has declined.

There is a system for guardians to take care of the property of elderly people whose sense of judgment has declined, but for ordinary people, the system is thought to be inaccessible at best. To protect senior citizens from these illegal contractors, a more practical system is called for.

Government authorities have listed on their websites the names of all such illegal operations which have been disciplined in the past for fraudulent practices in door-to-door sales.

Those who trample underfoot and ruin other people's declining years are still rampant. Unless these practices are eradicated, the tranquility of our aging society cannot be maintained. The investigating authorities are seriously taking action.

JS

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