

# Terrorism: An Unexpected Reality

By Catrien Ross

As a script for an action thriller or a movie, the plot is too extreme to be believable.

A subway gas attack in Japan's capital. Alleged links with an apocalyptic cult. Massive police raids on cult headquarters. Hidden laboratories for biological and chemical warfare. Nazi-era nerve gas and weapons manufacturing. A cult membership drawn from among young intellectuals and the Japanese Self-Defense Forces. Russian member branches and possible connections with the Russian military. Poisoned sheep in Australia. Tales of abduction, kidnapping and confinement. Stimulant drugs and ties to the Japanese mafia. A convoluted scenario of intrigue, kingdom-building and sedition. Add to this the attempted assassination of the chief of police, additional domestic terrorism, and the murder of a key cult leader.

It is all too much. Yet, incredibly, these are actual details in a real-life melodrama that is still unfolding. This is no fictional script, but a series of revelations which have shocked the nation, fostering a new and unfamiliar atmosphere of bewilderment and unease.



Photo: Kyodo News Service

Subway passengers awaiting assistance immediately following the March 20 sarin gas attack.

On March 20, just over two months after the devastating Great Hanshin Earthquake, a gas attack on the Tokyo subway system killed 11 and afflicted more than 5,000 people headed for work, mainly in and around Kasumigaseki, the area known as home to Japan's bureaucracy. Indeed, so exactly timed was the attack, coinciding with the apex of rush hour, that it has been described as a declaration of war against the Japanese government.

Official retaliation was swift and surprising. Two days later, police allowed television coverage of a massive raid against a religious group known as Aum Supreme Truth, an apocalyptic cult founded in 1987 by Asahara Shoko. Armed with canaries and gas masks, police raided the cult's main compound at Kamikuishikimura, some 110 miles west of Tokyo, in Yamanashi Prefecture. Their astonishing findings have since kept the Japanese people riveted to their television sets for the latest development in an ongoing drama of mind-boggling scope.

Police immediately seized tons of toxic chemicals which they subsequently alleged the cult used for the production of sarin, the gas thought to have been released in the Tokyo subways. The name of Satian No. 7, a building within the cult complex suspected as a sarin factory, became a household word. Arrest of cult members on various charges soon followed, with police raids continuing almost daily. But someone had clearly tipped off Aum's compound just prior to the main raid on March 22 because Asahara Shoko and key aides were nowhere to be found. On March 24 a videotape sent to NHK featured Asahara denying sarin production and any connection with the subway or any other gas attacks, a reference to a mysterious sarin incident in the city of Matsumoto, Nagano Prefecture in June 1994 in which seven people died and 600 were injured.

Then, on March 30, the commissioner

general of the National Police Agency was shot outside his apartment by what experts believe was a professional marksman. Kunimatsu Takaji survived his attempted assassination, but the act caused additional jitters, especially when it was noted that the gas attack had taken place in subway cars stopping near the National Police Agency. Could there be a connection?

Even as the police continued their raids, the unrest in Japan was compounded. Residents of Tokyo braced for another potential attack over the weekend of April 15, the date previously predicted by Asahara to be the happening of "something horrible" in the central capital, possibly in the Shinjuku area. Although the fated day passed without incident, security measures were heavily bolstered and people prepared just in case. One associate sent me a fax saying that he had asked his wife to stock food and water for the entire weekend—he was staying home. In fact, bottled water was sold out in many Tokyo supermarkets as an anxious populace laid in emergency supplies and curtailed travel activities.

I personally realized the extent to which the much-touted safety of Tokyo's transportation system had been jeopardized when I arrived at Yokohama Station on April 19, just 19 minutes after fumes had sent 335 people to nearby hospitals. Arriving safely at Yokohama City University School of Medicine, where I lecture, I found televisions blaring with the news of another gas attack targeting Yokohama and three adjoining stations. Thereafter, police released reports revealing that Yokohama had actually been a previous target on the same day as the subway gas attack, with 548 made ill from fumes inside a department store.

Tragically, April 19 was also the date of the car bombing of a federal government building in Oklahoma City, in the U.S. heartland. This act of domestic terrorism, in which 168 people died, was

quickly traced to a white, American male holding extreme right-wing views. It seems he may have planned the bombing in retaliation for the U.S. government's standoff with a religious sect known as the Branch Davidians in which 86 members died in a fire on April 19, 1993. Could cults and domestic terrorism be emerging parallels between the U.S. and Japan?

As if a whirlwind of terror had been released, events did not stop there. A troubling twist in the police investigation of Aum was the April 24 death by stabbing of the head of Aum's so-called "Science and Technology Ministry," Murai Hideo, who oversaw a group of 296 scientists and other Aum members and who had repeatedly denied Aum's involvement in the Tokyo gas attack, was knifed in front of the sect's Tokyo headquarters on the evening of April 23, even with 10 police officers on guard at the facility. His assailant was a young man claiming to be a South Korean and an unlikely member of one of Japan's ultra-rightist groups. By mid-May a member of Yamaguchi-gumi, a notorious organized crime syndicate that police now say bought stimulant drugs from Aum, had been arrested in connection with Murai's murder.

Somewhat belatedly, Shinjuku did become a terrorist target when on May 5 a burning bag containing sodium cyanide was found in the men's room at a Shinjuku subway station. Beside the bag was a second containing diluted sulfuric acid. Had the fire consumed both bags, the sodium cyanide and sulfuric acid would have chemically reacted, releasing enough hydrogen cyanide gas to kill an estimated 20,000 people. Eight days later, on May 13, a timed device exploded on the third floor of Narita airport's new terminal building. There were no injuries reported.

## Mantras, mayhem and murder

But intimidation and random killing are what terrorism is all about. The Great Hanshin Earthquake, while catastrophic, was a natural calamity. The subway gas attack, on the other hand,

was a manufactured disaster, plotted and carried out with the maliciousness that is peculiarly human. Increasingly, it seems, today's societies are becoming vulnerable to mass attack from individuals or groups who may or may not be mad, but who certainly are bent on fulfilling a private agenda, with potentially horrendous consequences.

As I write this article, Asahara Shoko has been arrested and key members have reportedly admitted being part of a team that staged the attack on the Tokyo subway system. With no motives yet apparent, police believe at least 10 people, led by Inoue Yoshihiro, a close Asahara aide, took part in releasing the nerve gas shortly after 8:00 a.m. on March 20.

Considered a doomsday cult, Aum Supreme Truth is a reclusive sect that believes the world will end, possibly as early as 1997. When this Armageddon is over, says Asahara, only enlightened Aum followers will remain alive, along with about 10% of the rest of the population. Such prophecies in themselves are unremarkable: Apocalyptic cults of all sorts abound, not only in Japan, but around the world.

Aum is also typical in its use of what have become standard cult methods of controlling followers. Would-be members were reportedly first encouraged to abandon their secular concerns and join Aum's communal life, often after donating their entire assets to the sect. Members were bonded to the cult through what one cult deprogramming expert calls manipulation of four basic keys: control of behavior, of emotions, of thought, and of information. Through such donated assets and various business interests, Aum became handsomely bankrolled: some reports estimate its worth at an unbelievable ¥100 billion.

One can argue that adults are free to choose the lives they wish to lead. If joining a cult is their decision, then so be it. But more sinister elements seem to have been part of the Aum picture from almost its very start. Aum Supreme Truth first attracted notoriety when it was tied to the disappearance in 1989 of a still-missing Yokohama lawyer, Sakamoto Tsutsumi, and his family.

Sakamoto had been representing more than 20 former Aum members in claims against the sect, including someone who reportedly paid ¥1 million for a vial of Asahara's blood. Since then there have been additional disappearances, as well as the detainment and mistreatment of people wanting to leave the sect. In June Asahara and top aids were indicted for murder and attempted murder.

Outside of his believers Asahara Shoko has remained a largely elusive figure, although the journalist Egawa Shoko examined his life in a book published in 1991. But as with many charismatic cult leaders, Asahara demanded—and received—abject loyalty from his followers. What is particularly striking is Asahara's apparent ability to attract young Japanese from elite educational backgrounds. These men and women were assured a career in business or government circles. Instead they chose to join Aum Supreme Truth.

Another baffling point is the cult's internal organization. According to police reports, in June 1994, Aum established 22 ministries and agencies modeled after Japanese government departments, including "Ministries" of Construction, Education, Health, Home Affairs, Finance, Justice, and Science and Technology. There was even a "Medical Treatment Ministry," headed by a physician, a medical graduate of the prestigious Keio University, who was arrested in April for illegally confining a woman member. This bizarre tribute to Japan's bureaucracy seems to counter Aum's image as a radical entity. After all, what could be more conventional than structuring a cult like a mock civil service? Was this Aum's idea of a joke, or a stated intent to ultimately replace the government? With so much talent on hand and Japan itself eager for bureaucratic reform, one wonders why Aum could not have been more creative.

Also puzzling is the cult's connection with Russia, where it has seven branches with an estimated 30,000 to 50,000 followers. The cult may have been planning purchases of Russian military equipment. Last August, for example, Asahara is said to have visited a

Russian tank division directly under the control of President Boris Yeltsin. Following the Tokyo subway gas attack, Yeltsin ordered police to ensure that Aum members did not bring sarin-related chemicals into Russia, and a Moscow court ordered confiscation of various cult holdings. Other governments, too, clamped down on Aum branches and activities. Until August 1994 some 24 Aum members lived on a farm in western Australia where traces of chemicals were found in soil samples and the wool from dead sheep. There was concern in Germany, South Korea and America.

## Organized religion and power

But what has it all been for? And what kind of man is Asahara?

In the early days of Aum, the Dalai Lama was among well-known religious personages who seemed impressed with Asahara's asserted search for spiritual truth. But as the organization swelled to some 10,000 members in Japan, Aum clearly moved far from spirituality, with Asahara, long haired and sight-impaired, growing ever more obsessed with danger and threats to his group. Within cults, self-styled gurus all too often become sadly twisted by power. In this case, too, extreme paranoia may have transformed Aum into a militant entity pitted against the Japanese government. But people are asking whether Aum acted alone, or if it was used as a conduit of terrorism by a group or groups yet unknown.

Another question is just how many would-be Asaharas there might be. In Japan today there are 183,996 designated and 47,023 non-designated religious groups. This is a nation with a history of sects and fringe cults. A major reason for the current numbers is the Religious Corporation Law, which provides outstandingly attractive privileges, including tax-incentives. For example, religious corporations enjoy tax reductions in 33 different businesses, including bathhouses, hair salons, entertainment operations, real estate, inns and restaurants, and medical institutions. Temple

admission fees and sales of temple talismans and charms are tax exempt. Once a group is officially recognized, Japanese law bars authorities from re-examining its activities, a precaution designed to protect religious freedom.

In a previous column I mentioned the link between Aikido and the Shinto-related Omoto sect, founded in 1892 by a woman mystic. In 1921 the group was crushed by Japanese authorities and many of its leaders indicted. Even the founder's grave was destroyed and in 1935 the government dynamited the sect's main facilities. Religious persecution has been a fact in Japan.

Yet the number of Aum members pales in comparison to an organization like Soka Gakkai, a lay Buddhist group founded in 1930 and boasting an estimated 8 million families. Powerful enough to have created its own, now-defunct political party, Soka Gakkai has been criticized for wielding far too much influence, especially among Japan's decision makers. Internally, followers have raised the current leader, Ikeda Daisaku, to the level of reigning monarch.

An even later arrival, a so-called "new, new religion," the Science of Happiness, claims 5 million loyal believers. These groups differ from Aum, of course, in that the former aim for long-term establishment whereas Asahara preached imminent world destruction. And religion clearly had very little to do with Aum's credo, which seems merely to have been a pretext for crimes against innocent people and a cover for overthrowing the government.

## A sense of loss

Watching the frenzied media coverage of unraveling events, I have been struck by a sense of disquiet as well as loss. If the allegations against Aum prove true, then the police acted in the best interests of an anxious public. Yet there are extremely important questions which must be asked. The Japanese people are rightly demanding answers. But such answers should probe deeply into all the facts, not be pabulum partially doled out to appease a national mood.

Something in Japan is shifting. It is crucial to find out what and why. The very fact of Aum's attraction for young people groomed for future leadership positions in Japan says much about the failure of mainstream Japanese society to meet emerging needs. I have written before about the search for deeper meaning among a growing number of Japanese. Although badly awry in the case of Aum Supreme Truth, it is nevertheless a legitimate—and increasingly necessary—quest.

Like people in other developed nations, more and more Japanese may be disheartened and disillusioned about the lack of essential connections to the roots and significance of life. A secure job and twice-yearly bonuses are no longer enough. Searching for more, yet unable to develop the individual strength that can forge new solutions, both the young and old find an easier way in religious sects, whether fringe or long-established. The postwar years in Japan have been described as a spiritual vacuum that provided a breeding ground for all manner of religious creeds, most revolving around a charismatic figure. Someone like Asahara has definite drawing power.

With economic success, moreover, has come an eroding integrity, as evidenced by widespread political corruption and abuse of power, continuous half-truths, and even the financial excesses of the "bubble economy" years. Spiritual confusion at the national level is translating into a disintegration of values at the personal level.

What this has to do with terrorist acts and the ties, if any, with Aum Supreme Truth, is part of a much larger question that cannot be ignored. Like America and Europe, which have both confronted the home-grown domestic terrorism of militant groups, Japan has been shaken by an unexpected reality. Future survival depends on an honest response. ■

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