

# Aum Cult Founder Asahara Sentenced to Death

Aum Shinrikyo cult founder Asahara Shoko was sentenced to death by the Tokyo District Court on Feb. 27 for ordering a series of brutal crimes committed by cult members.

The court found the guru, whose real name is Matsumoto Chizuo, guilty on 13 accounts in connection with crimes that caused 27 deaths, including the June 1994 sarin attack in Matsumoto and the March 1995 sarin attack on the Tokyo subway system. The death sentence had been demanded by prosecutors.

The verdict identified Asahara as the mastermind of the crimes and concluded that the guru planned to rule Japan in the name of salvation and his objective was so wretched and stupid that it merits the ultimate criticism. The victims' families have suffered so deeply from Asahara's crimes that there could be no other sentence than the death penalty, Presiding Judge Ogawa Shoji said.

The court found Asahara guilty on all 13 accounts and rejected the defense counsel's claim that the crimes were committed by

Asahara's followers and the guru himself was innocent. The court determined that Asahara conspired with his followers in all cases.

Referring to the sarin attack on the Tokyo subway system, which killed 12 people and injured more than 5,500, Ogawa noted that Aum members resorted to the brutal action out of fear that the police would raid their facilities before they armed themselves and they thought that the police would not carry out the raid if they launched an indiscriminate terrorist attack first.

The defense counsel for Asahara, who became the 12<sup>th</sup> Aum member to be sentenced to death, immediately filed an appeal. The sentence on Asahara was the final district court ruling handed down in cases related to the Aum cult.

Analyzing the causes of the series of crimes committed by the Aum cult, Ogawa said, "Asahara was lost in his fantasy that he was the absolute being and tried to rule Japan. His fantastic words brought about the crimes, which illustrated in an extreme form his desire to show off and rule other

people." The judge regarded the Aum crimes as the most brutal ever committed in Japan and said it was quite natural for the victims' families and survivors to feel like seeing the sternest justice meted out to Asahara and his followers.

Asahara's trial took seven years and 10 months. The Tokyo District Court held 257 sessions and spent a total of 1,258 hours on the trial, while a total of 522 witnesses took the stand.

As Asahara remained silent throughout most of the hearings, the trial failed to shed light on why he and a handful of his followers resorted to egocentric actions by self-justifying reasoning and why young people who graduated from elite universities were attracted by the Aum cult.

Ogawa charged that Asahara shifted all the blame for Aum crimes onto his followers, averted his eyes from reality and shut himself up in his own world. The guru never apologized to any of the victims and refused to talk about his responsibilities, and he has preserved his vicious influence on his followers, the judge added.