



Asahara Shoko, Leader of the Aum Shinrikyo Cult

Faith, Fanaticism, and Fear:

Aum Shinrikyo—The Birth and Death of a Terrorist Organization

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Introduction



In March 20, 1995, Japan, a nation recognized for its remarkably low crime rate, was struck by a devastating terrorist attack on its busy Tokyo subway system. The attack left 12 dead and as many as 5,500 injured and opened the world's eyes to the dangerous possibilities of terrorist attacks involving chemical weapons. The attack was eventually linked to a religious cult known as *Aum Shinrikyo*, which had amassed a very large following and millions of dollars worth of assets within Japan and other nations. Investigations following the subway attack revealed the deadly mission that drove this group and uncovered several previously unknown terrorist attacks it had attempted, as well as a web of criminal activity ranging from kidnapping and murder to the manufacture of weapons, illicit drugs, and deadly chemical agents.

About Aum

Aum Shinrikyo was founded by Chizuo Matsumoto, a partially blind Japanese man who gained a small group of followers while teaching yoga classes. Matsumoto's true religious fervor began in 1986, when he claimed to have received divine enlightenment while traveling in the Himalayan Mountains of India. It was at this time that Matsumoto changed his name to "The Holy" Asahara Shoko and launched a modest group of followers that he named Aum Shinrikyo (*Aum* meaning the powers of destruction and creation in the universe, and *Shinrikyo* meaning the teaching of the supreme truth).

Asahara used Aum Shinrikyo to spread his self-created religious teachings, which were based on an eclectic mix of Buddhist, Hindu, Taoist, and Christian belief systems. The group gained followers slowly at first and then much more rapidly after Aum gained official recognition as a religious organization by the Japanese government under the nation's Religious Corporations Law. Japanese officials were initially hesitant to grant Aum this status, largely due to a number of protests and complaints that had been filed by many of the families of existing Aum members over the group's requirement that followers sever all ties and communication with the outside world, including with their relatives and acquaintances. Aum responded to the Japanese government's reluctance with a fervent series of lawsuits and public demonstrations, a practice that the group would successfully employ many times in future years. Aum's campaign was victorious, and in 1989 it was granted official legal status as a religious organization. Under this status Aum would be free to pursue its activities without oversight from Japanese authorities, as the Religious Corporations Law provided the group with special shelters and privileges including tax benefits, the right to own property as an organization, and most importantly, protection from all state and other external interference. The law specifically prevents authorities from investigating a group's religious activities or doctrine, a stipulation that is widely interpreted to include any activities an

organization is involved with, including those raising revenue for the group or other private corporations.

Under its new official status as a legitimate religious organization, Aum's wealth and number of followers expanded rapidly. From 1992 to 1995, Aum membership increased from approximately 10,000 to 50,000 worldwide. The cult established facilities and branch offices in six countries, and their net worth grew from around 430 million yen to more than 100 billion yen. Aum amassed this wealth through a variety of legitimate and fraudulent activities, including donations and tithing by cult members, the sale of cult-related paraphernalia such as videotapes and books, the manufacture of illegal drugs, the hosting of seminars and training courses, and various commercial endeavors, including a chain of restaurants and computer and software manufacturing companies. Additional income was generated through bribes made to the group by local Japanese officials; in these instances Aum would reportedly threaten to establish new cult operations in cities if the officials in those areas did not pay the bribes Aum demanded. Aum also established a working partnership with the Japanese mafia involving illegal activities such as murder, theft, and extortion for profit.

While Aum grew and expanded, Asahara's teachings became more radical and Aum leaders gained increasing power over cult members. Aum leaders reportedly kept cult members docile and cooperative using various mind control techniques such as sleep and food deprivation and the administration of illicit drugs. Aum members, who donated everything they owned to the cult when they became followers, were financially dependant on the group, making it extremely difficult to break away from the group if they wanted to escape. Those who did attempt to leave the cult were often tracked down and forced to rejoin, many times through outright kidnapping.

Aum's Involvement in the Sakamoto Family Disappearance

One of the earliest examples of Aum's

murderous criminal activities occurred in May 1989, when the group allegedly kidnapped and killed attorney Tsutsumi Sakamoto and his wife and infant son. This family became Aum's targeted enemy when Tsutsumi began working with the families of several Aum members in lawsuits against the cult. At the time that the family went missing, Sakamoto was working on 23 of these cases, which were aimed at forcing Aum to release key followers who wanted to leave the cult.

The Sakamoto family seemingly disappeared overnight. When concerned family members entered the Sakamoto home, they found the residence empty. The family was gone, and the couple's and infant son's bedding had also disappeared. Besides that, the home seemed to be untouched. It was Sakamoto's mother who discovered what appeared to be a glaring piece of evidence linking Aum to the family's disappearance: a badge inscribed with the insignia of the Aum cult, which was found on the floor of the family home.

It would seem to many observers that this piece of evidence and Sakamoto's previous involvement with Aum would clearly link the cult to the family disappearance. However, the area police involved in the case denied that the cult was suspected and were reluctant to investigate the matter further. Police officials even went so far as to suggest that Sakamoto himself had organized his family's disappearance as a tactic to discredit the cult.

When the media learned the police were avoiding an investigation into the link between Aum and the Sakamoto family disappearance, the story made major headlines, placing increased pressure on the police force to investigate the matter. Some 16 days after the family went missing, the police finally took action by approaching Aum representatives and requesting interviews with the group's leaders. Aum denied these requests, and Asahara went underground to avoid questioning on the matter until several days later, when he called a press conference in which he denied Aum's involvement in the incident. During the press conference Asahara also claimed that the discovery of the Aum badge at the Sakamoto family

Aum Gains Powerful Presence in Russia

In 1992, Aum spread its activities into Russia with great success. Here the cult undertook a major recruiting campaign strengthened by positive media coverage and a strong new relationship with the Russian government. A weekly television program was even broadcast across the country in support of Aum. Many top Russian officials, including the then-chairman of the Russian security council, welcomed Aum into the country after the group gave more than \$14 million in cash donations along with computers and various supplies to the leadership of the Russian government. These political relationships gave Aum leaders valuable new contacts within the Russian ruling society, providing easier access to the nation's weapons stocks and scientific community. Using these new ties, Aum leaders attempted to purchase a range of powerful military weapons from the Russians, including a fighter aircraft, a rocket launcher, and a helicopter. Their requests for the fighter plane and rocket launcher were denied, but Aum was allowed to purchase the helicopter. The cult also gained many new Russian Aum operatives with scientific and technical backgrounds that would contribute greatly to its terrorist missions.

home could easily have been a coincidence, and stated that more than 40,000 of those badges had been produced and distributed to the public. In reality, less than 100 of these badges existed.

Even with this conflicting statement and the clear connection between the Sakamoto family and the Aum cult, the police did not pursue the case further and the media eventually stopped covering it. Six years later, in 1995, the bodies of Sakamoto, his wife, and their infant son were discovered at three separate remote mountainous locations.

Aum Enters the Japanese Political Arena

In 1989, Aum's activities took a new direction as Asahara and 24 of his followers entered various political elections in Japan. This new initiative was launched after Asahara proclaimed that political involvement would be necessary if Aum was to accomplish its ultimate goal, which at that time was to save the world from destruction resulting from an Armageddon-like battle between Japan and America. These Aum political candidates thought that by gaining seats on various political agencies they would be able to publicize the group and Asahara's teachings and thereby provide salvation to more people.

Aum's political campaign was marked with unethical practices carried out by both Aum candidates and supporters, such as the destruction of opposition party posters, spying on opponents, and voter intimidation. Even with these fraud-

ulent activities, all 25 Aum candidates were defeated.

It is believed that this resounding political defeat brought about a major change in the aim and ideology of Aum. Originally Asahara's teachings were based on the prevention of the apocalypse; he claimed that 30,000 people had to be saved through his teachings in order to save the world. After the political defeat, however, the cult's new aim was simply to protect its followers, as they now thought they could no longer save the world. With this new ideal, the group began building secluded communes equipped with nuclear shelters, places where they could live together self-sufficiently away from the influence of nonbelievers.

Early Terrorist Attacks Attempted by Aum

Aum initiated its campaign to create chemical weapons around 1993. It is believed the cult invested an estimated \$30 million into the effort, which involved many scientists and skilled workers and extensive facilities equipped with computer-controlled reactors and industrial packaging capabilities. Aum scientists experimented with various deadly toxins, including mustard gas, VX, and hydrogen cyanide, but sarin, a powerful nerve agent, eventually became the group's focus, and Aum leaders set a goal of producing 70-plus tons of sarin at one of its facilities in Kamikuisiki.

One of Aum's earliest attempted terrorist attacks using a toxic substance was

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carried out in central Tokyo in the area around the Japanese parliament. Aum's plan was to use a truck specially outfitted with a spraying device to spread *Clostridium botulinum*, the basis of botulism. The attack was aimed at destroying Japan's government by killing as many leaders as possible, with the goal of leaving the country in a panic and in need of a new government leader—who according to the cult's plans would be Asahara. The truck-mounted spraying devices that the Aum attackers used to disperse the toxin worked successfully, but luckily the toxin itself failed and the attack was ineffective.

Another unsuccessful attack was carried out soon after at one of the Aum facilities in Tokyo. In this attack Aum operatives

About Sarin

Sarin is colorless, odorless, and tasteless; it is highly toxic in both liquid and vapor states. It mixes easily with water, making it an especially dangerous threat if mixed with drinking water. Sarin is created through the combination of several chemicals, which may be purchased commercially with little difficulty, in a particular sequence. It was developed in Germany in the 1930s as a pesticide, and was later used in gas chambers at Nazi death camps.

According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, sarin can lead to death within 1 to 10 minutes of inhalation. It is 20 times more deadly than cyanide, and even a tiny dose of sarin can be deadly. Sarin prevents the body from regulating nerve impulses, which leads to continuous stimulation of glands and muscles and eventually system fatigue and a loss of bodily functions. Early signs and symptoms of sarin exposure include runny nose, difficulty breathing, pinpoint pupils, eye irritation, and blurred vision. Later symptoms include drooling, sweating, coughing and chest pain, diarrhea, confusion, drowsiness and weakness, headache, nausea, and vomiting. Those exposed will convulse, fall into coma and paralysis, and suffocate if intervention is not provided very quickly. Antidotes for sarin exposure exist, including atropine and oximes, but they must be administered quickly to be effective.

used a high-powered fan installed on the building roof to disperse anthrax into the air and spread it over the surrounding community. While no citizens were injured by the attack, many did report a terrible odor, illnesses within the pet population, and damage to plants and greenery. These were later determined to have been caused by exposure to a toxic agent. Police investigating the strange occurrence eventually linked the Aum facility to the release of the toxin. However, the group claimed the substance released was a mixture of perfumes and oils that had been burned to cleanse the building. The investigators accepted this reasoning, but before leaving the scene they took a sample of a strange fluid that was leaking from pipes in the Aum facility. This fluid was later found to contain high levels of active *anthrax bacilli*. Scientists eventually explained why the toxic agent released in the incident had not caused illness in the surrounding population; a veterinary vaccine anthrax strain had been used in the creation of the toxin emitted, and that particular strain was not capable of causing sickness in humans. Even with this finding, the police did not carry out additional investigations into the incident, and the matter was eventually forgotten.

These are just a few examples of Aum's early attempts at using toxic agents in attacks against innocent civilians and Japanese leaders. Luckily, Aum failed in these initial attempts and no known human injuries or fatalities were linked

to the events. Unfortunately, however, these test attacks went largely unnoticed or uninvestigated by Japanese authorities, which allowed Aum operatives to refine and improve the deadly techniques with the aim of creating true havoc and destruction in the near future.

Aum Attacks Aimed at Judges in Matsumoto

On June 27, 1994, Aum operatives carried out their most successful attack attempt in Matsumoto, Japan. This attack targeted three judges who were about to rule on a lawsuit over the legality of one of Aum's many land purchases.

For this attack, Aum operatives drove a specially converted refrigerator truck into the Matsumoto neighborhood where the three targeted judges resided. These operatives parked the truck and initiated a computer-controlled system designed to release a cloud of sarin gas into the air. This sarin was successfully released, and as planned a cloud of the dangerous toxin traveled on the breeze to a group of nearby homes, apartments, and dormitories where hundreds of citizens, including the targeted judges, were settling in for the evening. Since the weather was pleasant at the time of the attack, many of these residents had their doors and windows open to the night breeze, which allowed the sarin gas to easily enter their homes. These citizens quickly began falling ill, suffering from symptoms ranging from eye irritation, darkened and tunnel vision,

nausea, vomiting, headache, sore throat, and shortness of breath. Police and emergency officials were called to respond, and 500 affected residents were taken to local hospitals, where seven later died. The judges targeted by Aum's attack were not killed by the attack but were sickened enough to delay a ruling on the Aum case, meaning the cult's goals had ultimately been accomplished.

Emergency responders called to the attack scene were also affected by the released toxin. Eighteen of the 50 rescue workers involved in the operation fell ill, one seriously enough to require hospitalization.

Initially the police investigating the event and the physicians treating those affected by Aum's attack did not know what had caused the outbreak of illness in the Matsumoto area. These physicians based their treatments on the afflicted patients' symptoms, which were consistent with poisoning by an organophosphate substance. About a week later an official report was released revealing the illnesses had been caused by sarin exposure. This cause was determined when forensic specialists identified the agent through gas chromatography-mass spectrometry on a water sample retrieved from a pond in the affected area. These findings revealed that the area had been targeted with an intentional attack, but officials had no solid leads on who could have carried out such an operation. In fact, a local gardener was falsely accused of having released the

toxin and lived under intense scrutiny for several months while he was investigated; officials suspected the gardener had accidentally created the poisonous gases that injured so many while mixing fertilizers in his garden. The man was finally cleared of any connection to the event.

On July 9, only weeks after the Matsumoto incident, a major gas leak occurred in one of Aum's facilities. Aum members were witnessed fleeing from the facility wearing gas masks, and damage appeared on trees and grass in the surrounding area. After launching a minor investigation into the event, area police officially declared a tentative link between the gasses that had been released during this accident and those used in the Matsumoto attack. However, it wasn't until March of 1995 that police took action and raided the Aum facility in response to the connection, and even this measure did not lead to any arrests directly linked to the Matsumoto attack. Instead, three Aum members were arrested for an unrelated alleged kidnapping of one of their fellow members who had tried to escape the cult. No further action was reportedly taken by officials against the group in response to the attack.

Events Leading Up to the Tokyo Sarin Gas Attack

In the months leading up to Aum's attack on the Tokyo subway system, Japanese authorities were growing more suspicious of Aum's activities and had begun to collect increasing evidence that the cult was involved in the creation of chemical weapons. Still, due to the nation's laws protecting Aum as a religious organization, the police were unable to take action based on their suspicions.

A break came to these officials when the cult was directly linked to a kidnapping. At this time, Aum was losing hold over many of its followers despite the control and subversion tactics used to keep them subdued. One of these members was a 62-year-old woman who decided to flee the cult after devoting several years and her life savings to the group. When this woman escaped and went into hiding, Aum operatives searched but were unable to locate her. Finally, in an attempt to

force the woman to come out of hiding and rejoin the group, cult members kidnapped and killed her 68-year-old brother.

This kidnapping, which was clearly tied to Aum on many levels, finally provided Japanese police with an undeniable reason to investigate the cult's activities. These police agents launched preparatory measures to initiate a raid on Aum facilities, the largest operation of its kind to take place in the nation at that time. While the planned raid was kept highly secret, word leaked out to Aum leaders about the operation. It is suspected that undercover Aum operatives working within the Japanese police force released the information to the cult.

Armed with the time, date, and location of the planned police raids on Aum facilities, cult members went into action to cover up, hide, or destroy any evidence that could be used against them, including chemicals they had manufactured, equipment they had amassed, and various records revealing past cult activities. Many Aum members and leaders then went into hiding, including Asahara, who would continue to direct the group from a secret location for several months.

But Aum wasn't satisfied with protecting itself from police interference and was determined to take further action against the Japanese police force and government to delay or halt the planned raids. With this mission, Asahara and his top followers hastily planned a deadly attack to be carried out on the Tokyo subway system, with the goal of killing and injuring thousands of innocent civilians.

Terror On the Tokyo Subway System

Aum's deadliest attack was carried out on Tokyo's subway system during the busy morning rush hours of March 20, 1995. The attack was centered on Kasumagaseki station, which is located under several government offices, including the National Police Agency headquarters. This segment of the subway serves many of the officials working in Japan's leading government agencies, as well as thousands of civilian passengers. Aum knew an attack at this location could result in a great number

of deaths and injuries and extensive panic within the nation.

The attack was carried out by 5 Aum operatives who delivered sealed packages camouflaged with newspaper onto separate subway cars, where they punctured the packages using sharpened umbrella tips. The operatives then departed from the trains while the pierced packages leaked their deadly toxic substance: liquid sarin. This sarin vaporized and spread into the air, dispersing quickly among the innocent passengers aboard.

Although sarin is odorless, many passengers first noticed a strong solvent-like odor throughout the trains targeted in the Aum attack. Quickly after, these passengers began suffering initial symptoms of sarin exposure, including severe eye irritation; coughing, choking, and labored breathing; vomiting; and convulsions. Some passengers with more extensive exposure lost consciousness. Those who could struggled to escape the subway to reach fresh air outside.

More than 100 ambulances and 1,364 emergency medical workers were dispatched to the subway system. Overall more than 600 people were taken to area hospitals by emergency medical and fire vehicles, and more than 4,000 reached medical facilities on foot, in private automobiles, and in public taxis.

Confusion and panic spread quickly among those directly involved in the attack, including affected subway passengers and first responders. Fear also spread throughout the public as mixed messages and erroneous and limited information was released through subway officials, police, and the media. For example, initial reports blamed a gas explosion for the passengers' ailments.

While Aum's attack did not create the massive amount of death and injury that cult leaders had hoped, 12 lives were lost and as many as 5,500 people were injured as a result of the terrorist act. Luckily, the subway's powerful air exchange system was effective in removing the toxin from the air in the station, which substantially cut down on the number of casualties. Unfortunately, several factors related to insufficient preparation and response capabilities worsened the effects of the

Aum Operatives Who Carried Out the Tokyo Subway Attack

The devastating Tokyo sarin gas attack was carried out by 10 Aum operatives; five men served as getaway drivers and five others actually delivered the packages containing the deadly toxin onto the subways and released the chemicals. Those operatives are profiled below.

Hayashi Ikuo

Before becoming an Aum follower, Ikuo was a respected senior physician with the Japanese Ministry of Science and Technology specializing in heart and artery medicine. He graduated from one of Japan's leading universities and held several prominent hospital positions before joining the cult. Ikuo grew to be one of Aum's leading members, and was appointed Minister of Healing within the group.

Hirose Kenichi

Kenichi was known as a bright and well-educated physicist before joining Aum. Within the cult, Kenichi rose to the ranks of Aum's Chemical Brigade, and was a key operative within the group's Automatic Light Weapons Development arm.

Toyoda Toru

Toru, a highly educated physicist, joined Aum just before he was set to begin his doctoral program. Toru became a leading member in Aum's Chemical Brigade.

Yokohama Masato

Masato, a physicist who worked for an electronics firm before resigning to become an Aum follower, was made undersecretary of the cult's Ministry of Science and Technology, and was a leading member of their Automatic Light Weapons Manufacturing arm.

Hayashi Yasuo

Yasuo, a specialist in the field of artificial intelligence, held the third-highest position in Aum's Ministry of Science and Technology.

subway attack, including lack of communication between agencies involved in the rescue operations, lack of protocols for emergency response measures involving chemical agents, lack of quarantine of effected areas and people, lack of protective equipment for first responders and hospital workers, and poor information-sharing with the public and hospital staff. Also, the first responders working at the attack site did not have adequate training and education on agent identification and how to deal with such threats, and there was a lengthy delay before officials fully understood the nature of the attack. Even after the subway control center learned that an emergency had taken place within the rail line, many of the trains continued along their scheduled routes without delay, and station managers and workers were not notified of the situation. These shortfalls complicated recovery measures and allowed contamination to spread beyond the subway systems that were initially targeted in the attack.

Most of the emergency response personnel called to the Tokyo subway attack were not equipped with the protective gear needed in an environment where toxic chemicals were present. This led to secondary contamination, which sickened many EMTs, firefighters, police officers, and medical workers. Since most hospital staff were unaware that the incident had involved toxic agents, few decontamination measures were taken for patients transported to medical facilities, which resulted in many nurses and physicians becoming ill themselves. If the sarin used in the attacks had been more potent, this effect would have been far more devastating.

Difficulties also complicated the medical community's response to the subway attack. For example, few hospital personnel were aware of what types of toxins had been involved in the attack. Information was limited for these workers, sometimes coming from unexpected sources, including at least one physician who contacted hospitals in the affected area to share what he had learned while treating patients who had been injured in the earlier Matsumoto sarin gas attack. A hospital that had treated the Matsumoto victims also faxed

treatment information to Tokyo hospitals, and when one Japanese manufacturer of a medicine used to treat sarin-exposed patients learned of the attack through news reports, the manufacturer promptly shipped stocks of the medication to Tokyo hospitals without waiting for requests from officials.

At the time of the subway attack, most hospitals in Japan did not have set plans in place for handling disasters causing mass casualties. This was illustrated in the medical community's lack of decontamination for the subway

way
victims.

Even when hospital staff began decontamination efforts, they were hindered by a lack of facilities and training on the decontamination process.

Another problem within the medical community's response to the attacks was their staff organization and placement. When calls for assistance came through to the hospital, many physicians and nurses volunteered to provide aid at the subway stations. Unfortunately, once these aid workers arrived at the attack scene, the worst of the wounded had already been transported to the hospital. As a result,

the hospital was overwhelmed with the critically ill and was faced with a severe shortage of physicians and nurses.

Technical problems in communications systems arose in several agencies called to respond to the Tokyo sarin gas attack. The Tokyo Metropolitan Ambulance Control Center experienced a system overload due to the overwhelming number of calls it received; as a result EMTs lost radio contact with headquarters, leading to

a lack of hospital availability information and directions regarding emergency patient care.



Without their communication systems, these EMTs had to rely on public phones or simply guesswork to get any information they could. This resulted in delayed treatment for several critical patients, overloaded hospitals, and an inability to track the location, number, and medical status of patients affected by the attack.

Hospital communication systems also failed due to overwhelming use during the hours following the attack. Without the use of telephones, paging systems, and other communication devices, many physicians, nurses, and other hospital

staff were forced to share information by shouting to one another from room to room, often having to search out a person just to share or request vital information.

Communication was also poor among various agencies due to other factors. Area police officials were aware that sarin had been used in the attacks within hours of the toxin's release, but hospitals and other leading response agencies were not notified of this finding until much later.

The public was also largely left in the dark in the hours following the attack. This lack of effective information sharing with the public led to panic within the Tokyo area, which led to a mass of "worried well," citizens who had in no way been affected by the sarin gas attack who went to hospitals anyway, thinking they were suffering symptoms. This influx of patients who didn't actually require treatment caused additional pressure on area hospitals, which were already over capacity with those injured in the subway attacks. For example, more than half the patients treated at St. Luke's, one of the most overloaded hospitals following the attack, did not exhibit symptoms at all. The situation was further worsened since many medical workers were unaware of exactly what symptoms the Tokyo attack victims were suffering, making it difficult to distinguish which patients to prioritize.

Investigations Following the Tokyo Sarin Attack

Less than 2 days after the Tokyo subway attack, Japanese police carried out intensive raids on many of Aum's facilities across the nation. One of the facilities targeted was Satyan 7, which Aum had claimed was a shrine to one of the entities that the cult worshiped. When investigators entered this facility they found it actually housed a massive chemical production operation that was capable of producing thousands of kilograms of sarin per year. Although the facility was equipped for this purpose, it was not operating at the time of the raids, as it had been closed down following an accident that had occurred there the previous summer.

Even with the extensive cover up that Aum members had carried out in various

Aum in the United States

Two days after Aum's attacks on the Tokyo subway system, the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) launched an intensive investigation into the cult. Their concerns were reasonable, since Aum had established a substantial presence in the United States. Aum even had an office located only blocks from Times Square in New York City, although when police searched this facility no illegal activities were apparent at the site.

Aum facilities before the raids took place, Japanese police discovered more than 200 forms of deadly chemicals and the equipment needed to disperse those toxins. It is estimated that millions of people could have been killed if these items had been successfully used in terrorist attacks. Also uncovered during the raids were millions of dollars worth of cash and gold, large stocks of weapons, fully stocked hospital facilities, and several torture chambers and prison cells, some still holding former Aum followers.

More than 200 Aum members were arrested following the Tokyo subway attack for various crimes. However, even with extensive evidence uncovered during the raids, investigating police did not make any immediate arrests directly linked to the cult's previous terrorist attacks. Aum attorneys responded to the police raids by denying any wrongdoing and claiming that the toxins and equipment located during the facility searches had been intended for the manufacture of legal products, including fertilizers and consumables. These attorneys then sued the city in retaliation for the raids, claiming damages.

Meanwhile, Asahara remained at large until he was discovered hiding in a secret room near Aum's main facility in Kamikuishiki. When Asahara was located he had in his possession a large amount of cash and gold bars.

New Terrorist Attacks Follow



the Tokyo Subway Incident

Several attacks believed to have been carried out by Aum members followed the Tokyo subway terrorist attack, holding the nation in the grip of terror. The first occurred in late March 1995, when an unsuccessful assassination attempt was carried out against Chief Kunimatsu, the head of Japan's National Police Agency. Kunimatsu was shot and critically injured, but survived the attack. At the time of his near-assassination, Kunimatsu was heading up the Japanese police investigation into the Tokyo subway attacks.

Several minor gas-related attacks also followed on subway systems in the Tokyo-Yokohama vicinity, including one carried out on May 5 at one of Tokyo's highest-traffic subway stations, Shinjuku. At this station, a burning bag was located in a restroom. Fire officials were able to put the fire out, but not without difficulty. When the item was later examined, it was found to contain two condoms, one containing sodium cyanide and the other holding sulfuric acid. These items were

meant to mix to create the deadly gas hydrogen cyanide, which would have dispersed throughout the station, killing as many as 20,000 commuters.

Weeks later a letter bomb exploded at the office of Tokyo's governor. Following that incident, four additional devices designed to spread deadly toxins were found in Tokyo subways, luckily located before they were detonated. It is believed that if successfully detonated, these devices each could have taken thousands of innocent lives.

Information Uncovered Through Trials Following the Tokyo Attack

Several Aum members provided chilling testimony during the trials following the Tokyo subway attacks, revealing that the cult had made several attempts at creating and spreading such biological agents as anthrax, botulism, cholera, and Q fever. A group of Aum physicians and nurses had even traveled to Zaire under the guise of a medical mission with the goal of returning with samples of the Ebola

virus, which they intended to use as one of their many weapons. Although the cult had actively carried out nine attacks using these biological weapons, those attacks were unsuccessful because the agents they had attained weren't virulent enough to cause serious harm to the people who were exposed.

Computer Software Developed by Aum Used by Leading Japanese Agencies

Investigations following the Tokyo sarin gas attack uncovered the troubling revelation that several leading Japanese agencies, including the Defense Agency and police departments, had purchased computer systems that used software developed by Aum operatives working for one of five software companies that the cult operated. Many top Japanese companies were also found to have purchased or used the Aum-created software. This raised concerns that the Aum followers who developed the software could have created hidden capabilities within the programs that would allow Aum operatives to

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infiltrate key agency and company computers, which could lead to the unlawful release of vital sensitive information. The Tokyo police admitted that at least 90 government agencies and private organizations had purchased such software created by Aum followers, including the Japanese Telecommunications Ministry, Construction Ministry, and Education Ministry. These systems are no longer used, and investigations are ongoing as to whether any damage could still result from their previous use.

Convictions and Trials of Aum Members

Many Aum followers, including most of the cult's leaders, have now been tried and charged with various crimes related to their many violent and illegal activities. Asahara was charged with a range of unlawful actions, including murder through the Tokyo subway sarin gas attack, murder through the Matsumoto sarin gas attack, the kidnapping of the Sakamoto family, the production of several illegal drugs and substances, and the kidnapping and murders of several other individuals, including at least 33 Aum members who are believed to have been killed after attempting to flee the cult. Although Asahara maintained his innocence throughout the process, many Aum members confirmed his guilt when they confessed to being involved in the

crimes, claiming that they were working under Asahara's direct orders.

Asahara and 12 of his leading followers have been sentenced to death for their crimes, but to date none have been executed. Asahara's attorneys have appealed his sentence on the basis that the former Aum leader was unfit to stand trial, claiming that he should be hospitalized due to his deteriorating mental condition. Psychiatrists engaged by Asahara's legal team have testified that their client may be suffering from a brain disorder and is incompetent. The Tokyo High Court has engaged another psychiatrist to conduct an additional mental evaluation on Asahara; in the meantime he remains in prison.

Aum Today and Into the Future

In the months following the Tokyo subway attack, Japanese courts ordered the dissolution of Aum's religious status. This opened the group to close scrutiny by the police and removed the group's substantial tax shelters. Still, the cult is able to practice its faith and the businesses it has established.

In the years following the sarin gas attacks and subsequent trials and convictions of many Aum members, the cult has taken many steps in an effort to remake its image in the eyes of the public. One of these measures was the renaming of the group to *Aleph*, which means to start anew. Even with these changes, Aum followers still reportedly believe and live by Asahara's teachings. Today the group organizes yoga and computer classes to raise money and attract new followers. They also reportedly have plans to establish a new software company in Tokyo.

Today Aum is believed to have around 1,650 members and 28 facilities actively operating in Japan. While the group is currently under strict police surveillance, the court order allowing this surveillance ends in January 2006. The Japanese Public Security Intelligence Agency has requested a 3-year extension on this court-mandated surveillance, but at the time of this article's publication the measure had not yet been approved.

The Tokyo Subway Attack Victims Today

One of the shortfalls of Japan's response to the Tokyo subway sarin gas attack was a lack of psychological intervention following the incident. Few of the passengers and response workers affected by the attack received any mental health assistance after the traumatic event, and today many are believed to suffer symptoms related to post-traumatic stress.

Additionally, the victims of the Tokyo sarin gas attack were injured financially as well as physically and emotionally. Under Japanese law, Aum is responsible for compensating its victims for the damages its actions caused. However, the group's funds were depleted long before its victims were fully compensated. As a result, most victims had to pay their own medical bills resulting from the injuries they sustained during the attack.

New Laws and Regulations Established in Japan

The Tokyo sarin gas attack led to several changes in Japan's laws and regulation systems. A new law was established prohibiting the creation, possession, and use of sarin and other toxic agents, and the laws that had strictly prohibited police intervention into religious organizations' activities were modified. For example, the Group Regulation Act passed in 1999 was specifically designed to monitor groups that had committed mass murder. Efforts have also been undertaken to better prepare the Japanese medical and first-responder community to handle terrorist attacks and other major catastrophes through specialized training and equipment, although such resources have to date been limited.

Note: Due to space limitations the references for this article have not been included. For a complete list of references, please visit www.acfei.com (click "Online CE" and then "Read Articles").

About the Author

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