



ing neighbors, killing three of them. In December a 17-year-old boy went berserk in Tokyo's Shibuya district, injuring eight strangers with a baseball bat.

What made last week's school tragedy harder to comprehend was its inexplicable nature. Why this school? Why these kids? Ikeda Elementary is a competitive preparatory school where kindergartners take entrance exams and interview for the coveted 688 spots. Their parents are Japan's educated elite. The school occupies a spacious, leafy campus in a wealthy neighborhood.

The man arrested for the crime, Mamoru Takuma, 37, did not appear to have any motive for targeting the school. As his background emerged, however, it became clear that Takuma was a man with serious problems. He dropped out of high school in 1980, was discharged from the Air Force after two years, for undisclosed reasons, and worked as a bus driver. In 1998 he was employed as a janitor at an elementary school in Osaka. A year later, he was accused of drugging water used to make tea at the school; four teachers were hospitalized. Takuma was fired, but he wasn't prosecuted because a judge ruled he was mentally incapable of taking responsibility for the crime. He was admitted to a mental hospital and released after a few weeks. Said Takuma at the time: "My wife wanted to divorce me, and I wasn't having good relations with co-workers. I didn't bear grudges against those four teachers, but I just wanted to release my stress."

Judging by the statements he made to police after the killings, the stress had again become too overwhelming. "I want to die," police said he told them after they carted him away from the school. "If I killed children, I knew I would get the death penalty." According to police, Takuma said he had deliberately taken an overdose of tranquilizers before going on the knifing spree.

After the killings, in schools all over Japan officials dismissed classes early, held emergency meetings with parents and escorted children home. As of last week, Japanese schools like Ikeda Elementary were typically open and easy to enter. "We always felt safe here," says a mother. She doesn't feel safe anymore. Much of Japan, trying to make sense of this latest horrific crime, is feeling the same way, wondering what kind of country it has become. —Reported by Ginny Parker/Ikeda and Sachiko Sakamaki and Hiroko Tashiro/Tokyo

WORLD

Cutting into Innocence

A madman kills eight children and rattles Japan

By TIM LARIMER TOKYO

HELP ME!" THE SCHOOLCHILDREN detected the feeble, desperate cry from a nearby classroom in an elementary school in Ikeda, a suburb of Osaka in western Japan. Then they heard more screaming. In a first-floor classroom, second-graders were just finishing up a music class when a large man in cream-colored trousers dashed madly toward them, rambling incoherently as he wielded a 6-in. kitchen knife. He stabbed three boys standing by a chalkboard. When a girl tried to flee, he chased her down a corridor. "Run! Run!" a child yelled. A teacher threw a chair at the man but he dodged it, stabbed the teacher and kept running, leaving behind him a trail of blood, tears and traumatized seven-year-olds. A boy, the white shirt of his school uniform drenched in crimson, dashed out of the school with several schoolmates to a supermarket across the street. "A strange man came in the school, and I got stabbed," the second-grader told cashier Ikiyo Irie as she laid him down on a piece of cardboard. Finally, two teachers tackled the man and grabbed the knife from him.

It lasted just 10 terrifying minutes, during which the intruder killed eight children, injured 15 other pupils and two teachers and further eroded Japan's confidence that it is immune to the violence that

it associates with the U.S. It is the worst mass killing of schoolchildren in Japan's history, but it is only the latest in a series of knifing crimes (gun ownership is outlawed in Japan). "Schools were always regarded as sacred zones," says Yo Yoshino, a teacher who lives near the Ikeda school.

One more wall of safety has been breached, one more belief shattered. Japan is a country in which, despite rising rates of violent crime, people generally feel safe enough to let six-year-olds ride the Tokyo subways by themselves, and schoolchildren wander about on school trips without chaperones. The country's murder rate, for example, is one-sixth of that in the U.S. Yet, ever since the sarin-gas subway attacks at the hands of a religious cult in 1995 left 12 people dead and thousands injured, Japan has become increasingly aware that something is wrong with its well-ordered society. In 1997 a 14-year-old Kobe teenager killed and beheaded an 11-year-old playmate. A year later, four people died after eating arsenic-laced curry at a village festival. In December 1999, a teenage assailant knifed and killed a seven-year-old boy on a school playground. Last August a 15-year-old newspaper-delivery boy stabbed six sleep-



TROUBLED PAST: Takuma has a history of mental-health problems