School Stabbings Diminish Japan's Feelings of Safety

By Doug Struck
Washington Post Foreign Service

TOKYO, June 9 (Saturday)—Japan is asking what happened to its vaunted sense of safety after a knife-wielding former school employee slashed helter-skelter at elementary school students Friday, killing eight young children and wounding 15 other students and teachers.

The terror that erupted during morning classes in the school in Osaka shocked a nation that still sends 6-year-olds out by themselves on city streets and subways to get to school.

A teacher and four students remained in critical condition today, according to authorities.

"The safety myth obviously has been destroyed," said Hiroaki Iwai, a criminal sociologist and professor emeritus at Toyo University in Tokyo. "The crime rate has gone up, the arrest rate has gone down. It's leading to a very unwelcome situation in Japan."

Japan's crime rate still is low compared with that in the United States—the murder rate is one-sixth of that in America, for example. But the incidence of serious crimes has been climbing for more than a decade—it is now at a 24-year high and on a par with some European countries.

More disturbing, perhaps, is the recent spate of spectacular crimes that has transfixed the nation. In the last 18 months, Japan has seen a 7-year-old stabbed to death by a stranger on a school playground, a junior high student fatally stabbed in a schoolyard squabble, a 17-year-old boy hijack a bus and kill one passenger, a 15-year-old newsboy charged with killing three members of a neighbor's family and a subway passenger beaten to death after an argument.

But Friday's attack on 6-year-olds as they sat dressed in uniforms in their morning classes at Ikeda Elementary School was particularly unnerving for a country that trusts that its children are safe almost anywhere. It was the deadliest mass murder since a cult released poison gas in the Tokyo subway in 1995, killing 12 and injuring thousands.

BY KOTARO HONMA—YOMIURI SHIMBUN VIA ASSOCIATED PRESS

Stabbing victims at Ikeda Elementary School lie on stretchers as they wait to be taken to the hospital by ambulance.

BY MASAZUMI NAKAHARA—YOMIURI SHIMBUN VIA ASSOCIATED PRESS

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A wailing mother, left, receives support after learning of the stabbings that left eight children dead. At right, two injured victims, a schoolgirl and a teacher in a wheelchair, sit with their family members at Ikeda Municipal Hospital.

"I am worried for the children," Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi said Friday. "This is an awful case, so hard to understand." He later added: "I've lost my words to console. These children are at their cutest, sweetest age. How can we deal with the fact that our safe society is beginning to collapse?"

As more information emerged about the alleged attacker, 37-year-old Mamoru Takuma, questions arose as to whether this attack, at least, might have been prevented.

According to reports, Takuma was a troubled man with a troubled past. He had been fired from a job as a taxi driver for assaulting a hotel doorman and suspended from a job as a bus driver for assaulting his wife. In February, he was dismissed from a truck driver's job for road rage.

In 1999, while working as a school janitor in a primary school outside Osaka, he was charged with spiking the tea of four teachers with a tranquilizer. He was dismissed but was not prosecuted because of his emotional illness.

Instead, he was hospitalized for one month and then apparently released by a psychiatrist. He reportedly told police who questioned him after the school attack that he had taken an overdose of tranquilizers.

According to local reports, Takuma told the police: "I'm fed up with everything. I have tried to commit suicide many times, but I couldn't do it. Please execute me."

According to witnesses, he came into a classroom about 10:15 a.m. through a door from the playground. He carried a small kitchen knife with a six-inch blade, and immediately began slashing students sitting toward the back of the room.

When the students in the class fled, he moved to another classroom, and then two more, occasionally yelling and trembling as he cut children. Two children died at the scene, and six others died at the hospital, said a fire department spokesman. Takuma was finally subdued by two male teachers, one of whom struck him with a chair.

Seven girls and one boy were killed.

Takuma's history prompted complaints that he should not have been free to carry out the attack.

"We have to change our attitude toward people who are under stress or become mentally ill and are a danger to themselves or others," said Toyo Atsumi, a professor of law at Chuo University. "There is an overemphasis on the protection of the rights of those people. In Japan, it is too easy for a person who is committed to be released. There should be no basic right of people to inflict wounds or harm others."

"In the future, we are going to have incidents like this fairly often," he predicted. "The Japanese people are living under a great deal of stress. It will produce more cases like this."

But the mentally ill are only one group among many being offered as scapegoats for the rise in crime here.

Right-wing nationalists such as Tokyo Gov. Shintaro Ishihara, with the cooperation of the national police administration, blame the rise in crime on "foreigners"—usually a code word for Koreans and Chinese—even though they commit a disproportionately low number of crimes for their population.

Others point to juveniles as the new source of troubles; the numbers of juveniles involved in the most serious crimes has been on the rise.

But most analysts agree the reality is more complex. They say Japan managed to delay, but could not avoid, the social consequences of modern urban life. Only 50 years ago, it was a largely rural, traditional society. Now its village and family structures have been disrupted, replaced with a mobile, wired society, and by alienated city life among strangers.

"Japanese society is not anymore a perfectly safe society. We have to accept this as a fait accompli," said the Asahi Shimbun newspaper. "Everywhere in our society, the myth of safety is deteriorating. School is no longer an exception."

"There is a sense of anxiety," said the daily Yomiuri Shimbun, "that the social order is becoming undone."