

February 27, 2004

Ex-Leader of Japan Cult Sentenced to Death in Gas Attack

By NORIMITSU ONISHI

TOKYO, Feb. 27 — Shoko Asahara, the former leader of the religious cult that released deadly sarin gas into the Tokyo subway in 1995, was found guilty today of directing the attack and other crimes after an eight-year trial. He was sentenced to death.

The founder of the Aum Shinrikyo sect, his trademark flowing black hair and beard now graying and trimmed short, was convicted in Tokyo District Court of masterminding the attack, which killed 12 people, injured 5,500 more, and violently shook Japan's cherished self-image as one of the world's safest nations.

In the more than four hours it took the presiding judge to pronounce guilty verdicts on 13 charges against the defendant, Mr. Asahara reportedly crossed his arms, smiled, openly yawned, snorted, scratched his head, smelled his fingers, mumbled incoherently and muttered as if reciting mantras.

After the judge twice instructed Mr. Asahara to stand before him to receive his sentence, the defendant was made to stand up by five guards. Mr. Asahara, 48, wearing a black sweatshirt, stood silently as the judge read out the sentence of death.

"The defendant schemed to scatter large amounts of sarin in Tokyo to destroy the capital, build an Aum state and rule as its king," said the judge, Shoji Ogawa.

Since the trial started in 1996, Mr. Asahara had refused to answer questions and never made anything more than confusing comments. In what was regarded as an overly long and frustrating trial, the delivery of the death sentence provided one of the rare emotional moments for victims' relatives and ordinary Japanese.

"I am relieved," Shizue Takahashi, 57, the widow of a subway worker killed in the attack, said in an interview after the sentencing. "I could only think of the death sentence. I visited my husband's grave this morning."

"But what I couldn't learn was what Asahara thought in causing these incidents. He should have his reasons and intentions because he ordered his followers. I wanted to find out how he grew up, what his psychological condition and personality are like, but these are things that we could know only from his voice.

"The court could not find out these things. Nor did I understand why the young people committed murder, even if they had been ordered."

Lawyers for Mr. Asahara, who became the twelfth Aum member to receive the death penalty, immediately filed an appeal. The process could drag in court for years, experts say.

The trial's outcome hinged on which portrait of Mr. Asahara proved more credible. Was he, as his state-appointed lawyers argued, an innocent religious leader whose misguided disciples acted independently? Or was the prosecution's depiction of him as the master puppeteer the truth?

The group, which has changed its name to Aleph, issued a short statement apologizing to victims and their families, saying, "We will deeply take to heart the death sentence."

During the morning rush hour on March 20, 1995, Aum members released sarin into five crowded trains on three subway lines. They targeted the Kasumigaseki station, the area in which government buildings are concentrated, raising suspicions that they were plotting a coup.

Mr. Asahara, who was born half-blind and into a large, poor family, founded Aum in 1987 by espousing a mixture of Buddhist and Hindu thought. At the time of the attack, Aum is believed to have had more than 10,000 followers in Japan, and 30,000 to 40,000 in Russia.

The attack, which took place less than three months after a great earthquake in Kobe and as the effects of the collapse of Japan's so-called bubble economy began to be felt, led to much soul-searching.

This self-examination was set off in part because many of Aum's leaders were considered members of Japan's elite, graduates of top universities who, according to the values reigning at the time, should have been among society's most fulfilled.

And yet many of them had grown deeply dissatisfied with a Japan they viewed as having grown materialistically rich but spiritually empty.

"Some of them started to ask whether it is O.K. to live like this, and wondered seriously about the meaning of their lives and the way society should be," said Kimiaki Nishida, an associate professor of social psychology at Shizuoka Prefectural University who has interviewed seven Aum defendants. "These are the people who joined Aum."

Before the subway attack, Mr. Asahara appeared regularly on television, and in 1990 he and other members ran for Parliament. After none won, Aum built a commune at the foot of Mount Fuji, and factories to produce weapons and sarin.

Today the judge said that Aum planned the attack to thwart a raid by the police, who have also been widely criticized for having failed to investigate the cult more aggressively.

Despite Aum's involvement in crimes resulting in 27 deaths, the organization has been allowed to operate. The Justice Ministry's Public Security Intelligence Agency issued a recommendation that Aum be disbanded under an ant subversion law, but it was rejected on the grounds that it had declined in membership and resources, and posed no immediate danger.

Today the organization has 1,650 members in its headquarters in Tokyo and 13 other locations throughout Japan, said Norifumi Ishii, an official at the Public Security Intelligence Agency. Most were members before the subway attack. Those include some who left but eventually returned; new members tend to be young, lost Japanese.