

Death Reveals Harsh Side of a 'Model' in Japan



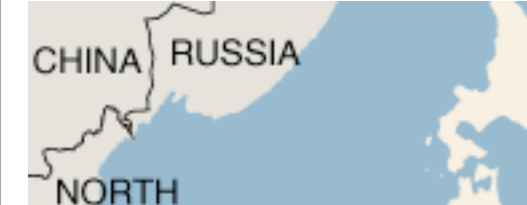
Ko Sasaki for The New York Times
A man was found dead in this house, apparently from starvation, about two months after he stopped receiving welfare benefits.

By NORIMITSU ONISHI
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KITAKYUSHU, Japan — In a thin notebook discovered along with a man's partly mummified corpse this summer was a detailed account of his last days, recording his hunger pangs, his drop in weight and, above all, his dream of eating a rice ball, a snack sold for about \$1 in convenience stores across the country.

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Kitakyushu was declared to have a "model" welfare policy.

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After being rejected twice, Hiroki Nishiyama, 56, now receives a monthly payment of \$930. He lived on bread for months.

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The shack where a 52-year-old man starved in Kitakyushu. One man has died in each of the last three years in the city after losing or being refused welfare benefits.

“3 a.m. This human being hasn't eaten in 10 days but is still alive,” he wrote. “I want to eat rice. I want to eat a rice ball.”

These were not the last words of a hiker lost in the wilderness, but those of a 52-year-old urban welfare recipient whose benefits had been cut off. And his case was not the first here.

One man has died in each of the last three years in this city in western Japan, apparently of starvation, after his welfare application was refused or his benefits cut off. Unable to buy food, all three men wasted away for months inside their homes, where their bodies were eventually found.

Only the most recent death drew nationwide attention, however, because of the diary, which has embarrassed city officials who initially defended their handling of the case and even described it as “model.”

In a way that the words of no living person could, the diary has shown the human costs of the economic transformation in Japan. As a widening income gap has pushed up welfare rolls in recent years, struggling cities like Kitakyushu have been under intense pressure to tighten eligibility.

The fallout from the most recent death has shown just how far the authorities in Kitakyushu went to achieve a flat welfare rate.

Japan has traditionally been hard on welfare recipients, and experts say this city's practices are common to many other local governments. Applicants are expected to turn to their relatives or use up their savings before getting benefits. Welfare is considered less of an entitlement than a shameful handout.

“Local governments tend to believe that using taxpayer money to help people in need is doing a disservice to citizens,” said Hiroshi Sugimura, a professor specializing in welfare at Hosei University in Tokyo. “To them, those in need are not citizens. Only those who pay taxes are citizens.”

Toshihiko Misaki, head of the city's welfare section, did not refer to the three deaths as from starvation, but called them “solitary.” He defended the system.

“On the one hand, there are people who've done their utmost to remain standing on their own feet,” Mr. Misaki said. “On the other hand, there are those who've gotten into trouble because they've led idle lives and are now receiving welfare. That's taxpayers' money. We get criticized by people who are trying their best, so we have to find the right balance.”

With no religious tradition of charity, Japan has few soup kitchens or other places for the indigent. Those that exist — run frequently by Christian missionaries from South Korea or Japan's tiny Christian population — cater mostly to the homeless.

Like the diarist, the other two men were sickly, and they seemingly starved after their applications for welfare were rejected. One, 68, was found lying face down in his apartment, where the gas and electricity had been cut off half a year earlier.

The man reportedly told neighbors that he had been denied benefits even though he had prostrated himself before a city official. At his death, he had lost about a third of his weight and had only a few dollars.

The application of the third man, 56, was rejected twice even though a city worker trying to collect an unpaid water bill reported seeing him weak and crawling on his apartment floor. Neighbors who last saw him said his legs had withered to the size of bamboo poles. His mummified corpse was discovered four months after his death.

Between 2000 and 2006, as Japan's welfare rate grew to 1.18 percent from 0.84 percent, Kitakyushu's rate grew microscopically — to 1.28 percent from 1.26 percent. That ranked it toward the bottom among major cities even though its economy was doing poorly.

To the central government — which bears 75 percent of welfare costs, began cutting benefits in 2003 and plans to rein in more — that made the city a model.

“We were the so-called honor student,” Mr. Misaki said in an interview.

He added: “Other cities came here to learn from us — how we did things. And the Welfare Ministry also showcased Kitakyushu's methods.”

Applicants first had to undergo an interview with a welfare official who then decided whether to hand them a one-page application form. In 80 percent of the cases here, applicants could not obtain a form.

After becoming ill and unable to work as a day laborer, another man, 56-year-old Hiroki Nishiyama, tried to apply for benefits twice last year but was told by the same city official to turn to his relatives for help.

“He was arrogant, his way of speaking,” Mr. Nishiyama said. “He was like, ‘What do you want? Go home quickly.’”

Desperate, eating only bread for months, Mr. Nishiyama tried to hang himself. He finally qualified for benefits this year after calling a hot line run by Tateyasu Takaki, a human rights lawyer who helps the needy apply. He hopes to resume working.

“This is, after all, shameful for me,” he said of the \$930 he receives monthly.

In response to the deaths of the first two men, the city this spring made applications available inside interview rooms, though it is still expected that the interviewer hands out the form. It stopped short of placing them next to other forms by reception desks. But a policy of removing recipients from the rolls as quickly as possible went unchanged. The diarist, a former taxi driver, qualified last December after receiving diagnoses of diabetes, high blood pressure and a bad liver brought on by alcohol abuse. He lived in a dilapidated row house whose walls and roof had partly collapsed. Electricity and gas had been cut off.

According to city documents, the man's case worker began pressing him to find a job within weeks of his receiving benefits. Tadashi Inagaki, a professor at the University of Kitakyushu who is leading a committee to investigate the three deaths, said the case worker's goal, in keeping with the welfare office's practice, was to get the man off welfare within six months.

Three months after he started receiving benefits, the man signed a form saying he no longer needed welfare. The city said it was voluntary, but an entry in his diary belies that. Writing that he was about to start looking for work, he added: “I was just about to give it a try when they cut me off. Are they telling the needy to die as quickly as possible?”

Takaharu Fujiyabu, a former case worker here who is now a lecturer at the University of Kitakyushu, said the city's 142 case workers, each handling 73 recipients, must remove five a year from welfare. Promotions are tied to the quota, he added.

Mr. Misaki, the head of the welfare section, said that the link to promotions existed about 15 years ago but added they were no longer tied. He said the quotas would be eliminated next year.

In his first year as a case worker, Mr. Fujiyabu recalled, a woman in her 50s, smelling of alcohol, asked for assistance. “I was told by my supervisor, ‘You know, don't you think someone like that is better off dead?’”

Perhaps out of shame, the man with the diary did not turn to his relatives or neighbors for help, even though he had lived all his life on the block.

“2 a.m. My belly's empty,” he wrote on May 25, some 45 days after his benefits were cut. “I want to fill my belly with rice balls.”

He added: “Weight is also down from 68 kilograms to 54 kilograms” — from 150 pounds to 119.

In front of the man's abandoned home, people have left flowers and a can of grapefruit-flavored alcohol.

“Now I'm filled with regret,” said Yoshikazu Okubo, 65, a neighbor who remembered playing with the dead man when they were boys. “If he had just asked me for one drink, I would have said, ‘Sure, drink up, then.’”

But the dead man's next-door neighbor, Yoshiaki Kita, 72, said the city had handled his case appropriately.

“He may have starved to death, but I believe he reaped what he sowed,” Mr. Kita said. “He was still young, so he could have taken on any job to feed himself.”

Mr. Kita — who had once seen corpses in his job as a general contractor — had guessed from the stench that his neighbor had died. He had watched swallows fly out of the broken house with greenbottle flies in their beaks.

A friend found the dead man's corpse on July 10, long after his last diary entry on June 5. In his diary, the man dreamed of rice balls to the end. To most Japanese, rice balls, which are now sold in convenience stores, were traditionally a snack that mothers usually made by hand: a ball of rice, wrapped in seaweed with perhaps a red plum buried inside, to be eaten during a hiking trip or some other pleasant activity.

“My belly's empty,” read the diary's last entry. “I want to eat a rice ball. I haven't eaten rice in 25 days.”

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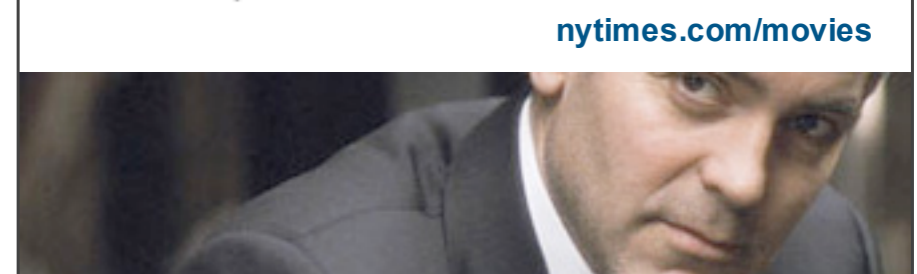
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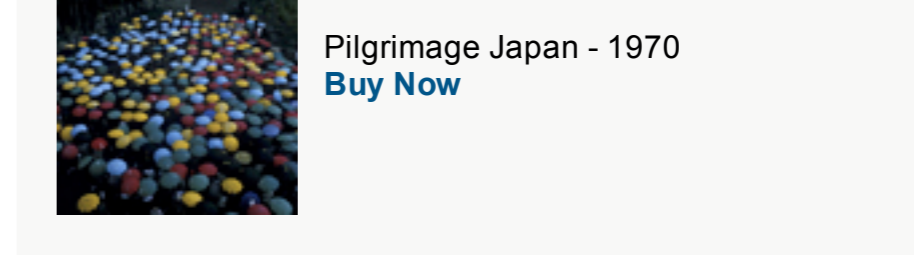
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