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Despite economic recovery, suicide rate remains high

By MARI YAMAGUCHI
 The Associated Press

The hanging death of the farm minister this week grimly underscored the country's stubbornly high suicide rate — and the government's struggle to discourage large numbers of Japanese from killing themselves.

Toshikatsu Matsuoka, 62, hanged himself Monday just before he was to face questioning in the Diet over a series of scandals that have rocked the government since he took office last September.

With that act, Matsuoka became one of the more than 30,000 Japanese who kill themselves every year — the second-highest suicide rate in the industrialized world. Japan's suicide rate per 100,000 people stood at 25.5 in 2003, compared with Russia's 38.7, according to World Health Organization figures.

"We are facing a kind of crisis," said Takanori Suzuki, a Cabinet Office official in charge of suicide prevention. "Our previous measures were not effective . . . and we will have to move quickly."

More than 32,500 Japanese took their own lives in 2005, up 0.7 percent from the year before, the latest National Police Agency statistics show.

Japan has long been known for having a tradition of suicide, but the numbers exploded to over 30,000 a year in the late 1990s amid a long economic slump that forced mass restructuring at companies — and drove many men in their 50s to kill themselves.

Those numbers have remained high despite the economic recovery, leaving officials bewildered. The government set up programs to



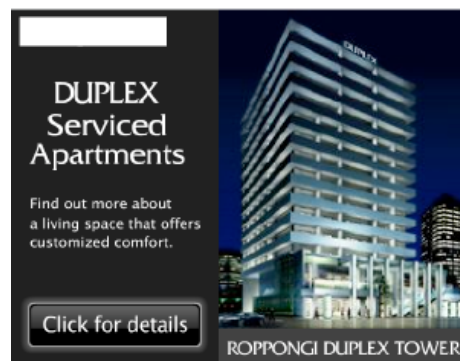
Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and his Cabinet members see off the hearse carrying farm minister Toshikatsu Matsuoka outside the Prime Minister's Official Residence in Tokyo on Tuesday, a day after the minister killed himself. AP PHOTO

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counsel the depressed and increase awareness of mental illness to no avail.

The sense of crisis has only been heightened in recent years with the increasing incidence of group suicides arranged among strangers over the Internet. The victims often drive to an isolated spot, seal the windows of their vehicles and asphyxiate themselves with fumes from a small charcoal burner.

Last June, the Diet enacted a law to bolster prevention, setting up Suzuki's department at the Cabinet Office to work on suicide reduction measures.

In the latest step, a panel of experts drafted measures in April that aim to cut suicides by 20 percent by 2016 to around 25,000 a year, including bolstering mental health support services such as counseling at workplaces and a network of community psychiatrists. The outline also defined suicide as something someone is "forced into" by social or economic pressures, instead of a personal choice by the weak-minded.

Yasuyuki Shimizu, who represents Life Link, a nonprofit organization providing support for suicide prevention, said Japan has failed to curb suicides because society minimizes the importance of personal troubles.

Shimizu also blamed the lack of flexibility and diversity in schools and companies, where the unorthodox or people with personal troubles can be ostracized.

"In this country, it is difficult to live without belonging to a group, and once you fall out there is hardly a chance to go back in," he said.

The effort faces cultural hurdles in Japan, where taking one's life has a long history as an honorable way of atoning for public disgrace and expressing the depth of one's shame. Matsuoka's situation fit that description.

"Death puts an end to everything, and the victim becomes a god, and free of criticism," said Yukiko Nishihara, founder of the Tokyo branch of Befrienders Worldwide.

Nishihara said she was alarmed when she saw Matsuoka's haggard face during Diet sessions last week. She said he seemed "over the edge," and she regretted that the signals were overlooked.

While the economy has recovered strongly, analysts say the fruits of that have been enjoyed only by major corporations and their employees, rather than workers of small and midsize companies, which have dominated recent bankruptcies.

Nishihara said those who commit suicide are often hardworking, serious people. Because they are diligent, their workload gets ever more demanding until they break down with health problems or depression.



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- ☐ Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End
- ☐ The Prestige
- ☐ Saiyuki
- ☐ The Transformers: The Movie
- ☐ Vexille
- ☐ Zodiac

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