

1st executions in 20 months carried out / Ogawa orders deaths of 3 murderers

The Yomiuri Shimbun

The Justice Ministry announced Thursday that three death-row murder convicts were executed in the morning at the detention houses where they had been held in Tokyo, Hiroshima and Fukuoka, the first executions since two inmates were executed 20 months ago on July 28, 2010.

It was the second time for executions to be carried out under a government led by the Democratic Party of Japan and the first since Justice Minister Toshio Ogawa assumed the post in January.

They were conducted during a Diet session, also a rare move.

The latest executions leave the number of death-row inmates at 132.

After the government changeover in 2009 from the coalition led by the Liberal Democratic Party to the DPJ-led coalition, the number of executions drastically diminished. The 2011 figure was zero, the first time that had happened in 19 years.

At a press conference after Thursday's executions, Ogawa explained why he ordered them, saying: "Punitive power belongs to the people. In trials held under the lay judge system that was introduced to reflect their opinions, executions have been supported. I thought I should perform this duty even though some people oppose [capital punishment]."

The three death-row convicts were Yasuaki Uwabe, 48; Tomoyuki Furusawa, 46; and Yasutoshi Matsuda, 44. They were executed at the Tokyo, Hiroshima and Fukuoka detention houses, respectively.

Uwabe went on a homicidal rampage at JR Shimonoseki Station in Yamaguchi Prefecture in September 1999. He drove a rental car into the station building, hitting some people with the vehicle and attacking others with a knife. He killed five people and injured 10.

Furusawa sneaked into his wife's parents' condominium in Tsuzuki Ward, Yokohama, in July 2002 to abduct his wife, who wanted to divorce him. In addition to the

kidnapping, he stabbed three people to death: his wife's father, 71; her mother, 63; and her 12-year-old son from a previous marriage.

Matsuda killed a 53-year-old female bar operator in November 2001 and an 82-year-old woman who operated a general store the next month, both in Miyazaki Prefecture. He also stole a total of about 650,000 yen from them.

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A crisis of public trust in system

It is likely that Ogawa ordered the executions only three months after he assumed the justice minister's post due to a sense of danger that the people's trust in the nation's system of capital punishment might be lost if no executions were carried out for a period longer than 20 months.

The number of death-row convicts was 135 as of Wednesday. After the latest executions conducted under then Justice Minister Keiko Chiba in July 2010, the number hit its highest level since the end of World War II and continued increasing.

Although many death sentences have been given under the lay judge system, four justice ministers in the DPJ government did not order any executions.

Many Justice Ministry officials had been concerned that if no executions were carried out despite the lay judges' decisions as a result of their anguished deliberations, people would not be convinced of the seriousness of the system, a high-ranking ministry official said.

Chiba, who advocates abolishing the death penalty, allowed journalists to tour an execution site when she was justice minister.

Also, the Japan Federation of Bar Associations changed the name of a panel on capital punishment from "the committee to achieve suspension of executions" to "the committee to discuss the abolition of the death penalty."

With these moves amid a global trend toward abolishing capital punishment, some people say that discussions on eliminating the death penalty will be soon be fully under way in Japan.

However, Ogawa vowed to resume executions at his inaugural press conference in January, saying, "[It's] a very difficult duty, but I'll do it."

In March, he finished a ministerial study session to discuss the death penalty system, including the idea of its abolition, apparently to pave the way to the resumption of executions.

At Thursday's press conference, Ogawa mentioned support for the system in public opinion polls and the death sentences handed down under the lay judge system as two reasons for his order to the executions.

It seems his decision to conduct the executions within the current fiscal year, which ends Saturday, was intended to convince the public.

(Mar. 30, 2012)