

NATIONAL / CRIME & LEGAL

Two inmates hanged for yakuza slayings

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[ARTICLE HISTORY](#) | APR 26, 2013

Two inmates were hanged in Tokyo on Friday in the second round of executions to be approved by the Liberal Democratic Party-led administration of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe.

The inmates were Yoshihide Miyagi, 56, and Katsuji Hamasaki, 64, the Justice Ministry said.

Members of a yakuza syndicate, the pair were convicted of conspiring with an accomplice to gun down two rival gangsters at a family restaurant in Chiba Prefecture in 2005.

The human rights watchdog Amnesty International immediately condemned the hangings, saying the fast pace of executions by the LDP-led government tells the world that Japan is determined to ignore calls by the international community to abolish the death penalty.

With the executions, the number of death-row inmates dropped to 134.

At a morning news conference after the executions, Justice Minister Sadakazu Tanigaki described Miyagi and Hamasaki's crime as "nefarious and cruel," especially given that they fired eight shots in a place crowded with innocent bystanders.

Tanigaki also said the pair unleashed their hail of gunfire to "save the face of their organization," a motivation he described as typical of yakuza.

"The two were sentenced to death by courts after careful scrutiny, and I myself repeatedly mulled over their cases before signing the final order," Tanigaki said.

Throughout the news conference, Tanigaki repeated that he carefully assessed their culpability and that he made his decision independent of any external circumstances.

Asked about the rising number of death-row inmates in recent years, Tanigaki said this did not spur his decision.

Also, asked whether the pace of executions under the LDP — the two Friday came two months after three inmates were sent to the gallows in February — represents a significant difference in policy with the Democratic Party of Japan, Tanigaki said policy differences between the two parties were never part of his concern.

Capital punishment was carried out at a snail's pace during the three-year rule of the DPJ. Japan went a full year with no hangings in 2011, the first time that had happened in 19 years. While acknowledging he is keenly aware that the death penalty entails grave consequences and that the global trend is toward abolishing capital punishment, Tanigaki stressed that the practice still exists in some countries and that his responsibility boils down to giving each case serious consideration.

Amnesty International issued a statement condemning the expeditious pace with which the LDP-led administration has carried out executions so far.

“We consider this a declaration by the Japanese government and the Justice Ministry that Japan is determined to turn its back on calls by the international community and carve out a path to massacres, and for this, we are strongly disappointed,” it said.

In December, the United Nations adopted by an overwhelming majority a nonbinding resolution calling for a worldwide halt to capital punishment, further highlighting the increasing global pressure on Japan to end the practice.

The resolution, the fourth of its kind since it was first discussed in the U.N. in 2007, won support from a record 111 countries, including Canada, the Philippines and Brazil.

Currently, Japan and the United States are the only countries among the Group of Eight richest nations that still execute criminals.

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