

Hydrogen Sulfide Gas Suicides Raise Specter of Terrorist Attacks

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Suicides using hydrogen sulfide gas (H₂S) have been reported almost daily nationwide in Japan recently. These cases (60 in April alone) have not only alarmed the public—because in many cases, buildings have had to be evacuated—but crisis management professionals are worried as well. This is because the spate of gas suicide cases brings back memories of the sarin gas attacks on the Tokyo subway system by Aum Shinrikyo in 1995.

The production of hydrogen sulfide gas is easy because the necessary materials are available at supermarkets and other stores. After a college student committed suicide this way in Kagawa Prefecture in 2007, a “how-to” manual started circulating on the Internet, which authorities partly blame for a chain reaction of similar suicides.

“According to the manual, if you breathe just 0.05% of hydrogen sulfide in the air, it will cause severe vomiting, followed by difficult in breathing. Next, the victim becomes disoriented and finally loses consciousness. Death comes in 30-60 minutes. This is definitely not an easy way to die,” said Sueshige Seta, former vice president of the National Research Institute of Forensic Science.

An official at the National Police Agency said the NPA is worried about possible terrorist uses of the gas like the sarin attacks. He says, “Unlike sarin gas which needs large scale production plans, hydrogen sulfide gas doesn’t. Police officials are very much concerned about it actually.”

What if hydrogen sulfide gas were used in trains during the morning rush hour? “It is easy to bring the necessary substances onto a crowded train and then mix them inside a bag,” said Seta. “Nobody in the car would escape. The closer you were to the person with the gas, the worse you would suffer.”

What if the gas were introduced into buildings through air conditioners? Seta said police are concerned about such an attack, especially with the G-8 summit coming up in Hokkaido in July. “I don’t think anybody would be killed that way, but if terrorists spread the gas directly into closed rooms, the occupants would possibly suffer severe injuries.”

Koichi Oizumi, a crisis management professor at Aomori Chuo Gakuin University, said, “Authorities in Japan are very lax when it comes to controls of toxic substances. I don’t think we have learned anything at all from our experience in the 1997 sarin attacks. As long as daily materials are used for producing toxic gases and possibly for terrorist attacks, authorities should regulate the use of these substances as well as ensure safe sales routes. During the G-8 summit, not only ministers from foreign countries but also a lot of other people will gather. We need to take action to avoid any risk of terrorist attacks at the venues.” (Translated by Taro Fujimoto)

Source: <http://www.japantoday.com/category/shukan-post/view/hydrogen-sulfide-gas-suicides-raise-specter-of-terrorist-attacks>