

Three inmates sent to gallows; 99 left on death row

By JUN HONGO

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The Justice Ministry hanged three death-row inmates Friday in the second set of executions in four months, drawing quick protests from lawmakers and human rights groups opposed to capital punishment.

The inmates sent to the gallows by Justice Minister Jinen Nagase were Kosaku Nada, 56, at the Osaka Detention House, Yoshikatsu Oda, 59, at the Fukuoka Detention House and Masahiro Tanaka, 42, at the Tokyo Detention House.

The hangings preceded a stretch of national holidays that starts Saturday, and Amnesty International Japan called the executions "an attempt (by Nagase) to shut down any debate at the Diet."

Nagase had approved the execution of four death-row inmates last Christmas Day, when the Diet was in recess.

With Friday's executions, Nagase has sent seven inmates to the gallows since he took the post in September. The hangings reduced the number of death-row inmates in Japan to 99, according to the Justice Ministry.

According to information provided by Amnesty, Kosaku Nada was put to death for the 1983 slaying of a coworker's wife and her son in Hyogo Prefecture.

Nada strangled the mother with a rope and dropped the 4-year-old son from a bridge into the Chikusa River. He used the insurance card he stole from the woman to obtain 1 million yen in loans from a consumer lender.

Nada had claimed he did not intend to kill the two. The Supreme Court in September 1992 finalized his sentence.

Yoshikatsu Oda was sentenced to hang in March 2000 for the murders of two people in which he tried to acquire their insurance money. The Fukuoka District Court ruled in 2000 that he conspired with an acquaintance to fatally stab the couple, who were in their 20s, and make it look like a double-suicide.

Oda remained mum on the charges against him during the early stages of the trial but later owned up to the slayings. His sentence was finalized after he withdrew his counsel's appeal to the Fukuoka High Court.

Masahiro Tanaka's death sentence was upheld by the top court in September 2000.

Tanaka was arrested for four murders between 1984 and 1991, including choking his aunt to death and stabbing a porn shop owner in Kagawa Prefecture. He was also convicted of fraud, robbery and of dumping his aunt's corpse.

Nagase's predecessor, Seiken Sugiura, a devout Buddhist, did not sign any execution orders during his 11-month stint as justice minister. The four hangings approved by Nagase in December were the first executions in Japan in 15 months.

Makoto Teranaka, secretary general of Amnesty International Japan, told reporters Friday's three hangings "were likely conducted to reduce the number of death-row inmates" -- after headlines were made when the number topped 100 last year -- and lacked prudent judgment.

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