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Japan's foreigner crime fears

By Hussain Khan

TOKYO - Japan seems caught in a media frenzy - without much justification - about crime committed by foreign nationals, a perception that is a growing problem for multinational business people, tourists and just about everybody else but the Japanese, who seem determined to blame their crime problems on everybody but themselves.

Writing about the perception of deteriorating law and order, the daily Yomiuri Shimbun in a Japanese-language editorial recently pointed to what it perceived as increasing foreign-instigated crime in Japan and commended all political parties for vowing in bloodthirsty stump speeches during the recent electoral campaigns to do something about it. But, the paper lamented, none of the politicians has come out with any specific proposals to quell foreign-instigated crime.

Despite the rising tide of rhetoric, however, there seems to be very little foundation for concerns about foreigners. The National Police Agency recently published a White Paper on foreign crime in Japan. Unfortunately for the media and the politicians, the paper acknowledged that foreign-instigated crime had actually fallen in 2000 and 2001.

The number increased thereafter - which is somewhat natural as the numbers of foreigners in Japan has increased markedly as well, meaning that even if the percentages of crime committed by foreigners drop, real numbers are probably bound to increase. A record 1,851,758 foreigners registered with immigration authorities as of last December 31, a 4.1 percent increase from the high recorded a year earlier, according to data released by the Justice Ministry's Immigration Bureau.

The number of foreign nationals in Japan to study came to 110,415, breaking for the first time the 100,000 mark targeted by the government in 1983, according to the bureau. The number of registered foreigners is equivalent to 1.45 percent of the nation's total population of 127,435,350 as of October 1. While the nation's overall popu-

lation grew 2.3 percent in the past decade, the number of registered foreigners grew 44.5 percent in the same period.

Registered residents are from 183 countries and territories, with Koreans comprising 33.8 percent of the total, followed by Chinese (22.9 percent), Brazilians (14.5 percent), Filipinos (9.1 percent), Peruvians (2.8 percent) and Americans (2.6 percent). Tokyo accommodates the largest proportion of foreign residents, accounting for 18.1 percent. Osaka, Aichi, Kanagawa and Hyogo prefectures follow.

The above statistics indicate that the total number of crimes has doubled since 1980, reaching about 2.85 million, according to the police White Paper. There are no statistics in the paper to prove that the increase in foreign crime rate was commensurate with the increasing percentage of foreigners in Japan.

In fact, despite the increase in the numbers of foreign residents, foreign-instigated crime was only 1.39 percent of the total committed in Japan in 2002 - thus below the statistical norm for the number of foreigners in the population.

Crimes might have increased by foreigners if they had remained unemployed, as in most European countries. But in Japan, foreigners by and large are already working, since it takes a sponsor-employer to get into the country to work.

Nonetheless, sensational stories in the media on foreign criminals are commonplace if sometimes misleading. For instance, a two-hour show supposedly dealing with foreign criminals was aired nationally by NTV television recently that mainly depicted reporters and cameramen following the police. More than a quarter of the airtime was devoted to foreign crime, with no interaction between police and foreigners except to arrest them.

But it makes good politics. Two days after the Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi announced his new cabinet after his re-election as president of the Liberal Democratic Party on September 20, three cabinet members, Justice Minister Daizo Nozawa, Public Management Minister Taro Aso and National Public Safety Chairwoman Kiyoko Ono, appeared on NHK television and talked about foreign crime in their first policy statements.

Nozawa said the prime minister had charged him to make Japan the "world's safest country" again. Kiyoko Ono was the most specific, saying that foreign crime and youth crime were among her policy priorities.

But while Japanese eyes are on foreigners, there is plenty of local activity. Murders, robberies and other crimes committed in Japan rose 16.6 percent year-on-year to 11,304 cases in the January-June period, according to data compiled by the National Police Agency. This figure marked the highest level of crime since 1989, the earliest year for which comparable data are available. Felony cases reported by the police have surged 120 percent over the past 10 years.

The number of serious crimes such as murder and arson committed by juveniles also increased. Such figures for juveniles under the age of 14 - the minimum age at which offenders face criminal charges - totaled 131 in the first half, up 87.1 percent from the same period last year.

Commenting on the crime situation, Nihon Keizai Shimbun noted: "Three categories of crimes pose an especially serious threat to public safety in Japan: juvenile crimes, which are growing in both number and brutality; the rapidly increasing number of offenses committed by foreigners; and crimes involving gangs, who are quietly infiltrating ever deeper into the fabric of society. Reducing these crimes is crucial to turning around the worsening situation."

It is clear, however, that in these categories, foreigners are neither involved with gangs, which are composed of Japanese citizens, nor are there any minors among foreigners coming to Japan to commit any juvenile crimes.

There is little public discussion by Japanese sociologists on how to prevent the increasing crime wave. In most societies, public crime can be closely correlated with rising joblessness, an increasing problem in Japan as the country has attempted to work through its economic problems, restructure companies and cut lifetime employment.

The media and the politicians have one solution: increase the number of police officers. Almost all political parties asserted in their election pledges to boost police forces. The Democratic Party of Japan, for instance, wants to recruit an additional 30,000 local police officers over four years.

Given that the number of citizens per officer in Japan is among the highest in the developed world, a certain buildup is said to be unavoidable. New Komeito's proposals to hire retired officers and privatize some police duties related to enforcing traffic rules merit serious consideration. The Tokyo metropolitan government's plan to make its employees available to law-enforcement authorities should provoke discussion on the flexible use of staff across jurisdictions.

Nonetheless, the surge appears to be more in public perception than actual crime. About 142,000 juveniles were arrested under the criminal law last year, about 70 percent of the peak level in 1983. Among those aged under 14 who are not subject to criminal penalties, 20,477 were taken into custody by the police for violating laws, less than a third the figure in 1981.

The number of juveniles who committed heinous crimes such as murder or burglary, after peaking in 1959, declined almost continually until 1991, when the figure turned upward again. The murder ratio, the percentage of murders by males per 1 million population, is highest among the late-teen and early-20s cohort globally, but in post-war Japan, the ratio in this age bracket has continued to plunge sharply in a movement counter to the world trend, said Mariko Hasegawa, a professor at Waseda University. "Japanese young people have become a group with an exceptionally low murder ratio," she noted.

Still, juvenile delinquency is one of the most important security issues to address. Juveniles commit eight times as many crimes as adults do and account for 40 percent of those nabbed under the criminal law. They are to blame for 70 percent of street crimes, such as bag-snatching and motorcycle theft, which affects the perceived safety of a society.

With many street criminals evading arrest, the actual number of juveniles who get involved in such wrongdoing is believed to be much higher than the total shown in the statistics.

These young criminals typically form groups and repeatedly offend, ganging up on the homeless or weaker members of their own group. For such youths, strict punishment as well as active exposure of their crimes are effective in stopping them from

engaging in misconduct. According to Hasegawa, to prevent such a boy from committing a crime, a medical and psychological approach would be more effective than a severe penalty.

Professor Hasegawa attributed the falling murder ratio among Japanese youth to the high level of education available to a wider spectrum of people and a lifetime employment system at companies in postwar Japan.

"With the Japanese economy and society set to undergo a sea change, the ratio will rise in years to come," she predicted. "It is vital to examine what measures have been effective in deterring juveniles from becoming involved in crimes and reflects the outcome of the study in future steps."

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