

5 August 2016

On Mass Murder Case at a Facility for People with Disabilities in Sagamihara

Katsunori Fujii

Chairperson

NPO Japan Council on Disability

The mass murder took place on the 26th of July at “Tsukui Yamayuri En,” an institution for people with intellectual disabilities in Sagamihara, and it has left many people horrified. I extend my deepest condolences to the 19 persons who were suddenly deprived of life. Also, I pray for the earliest recovery of those who, though barely escaping death, have been injured in mind and body.

More than a week has passed since the incident, but the whole picture of the incident, including the condition and the background of the suspect, is not clear even now. Based on the past news reports, I would like to express my views at the moment.

This incident is an unprecedented atrocious massacre targeted at people with severe disabilities who had no way of resisting it. We will never forgive such a massacre.

In his letter addressed to House of Representatives Speaker, the suspect wrote: “It is meaningless for people with disabilities to live,” and “It would be better if they are put to mercy killing.” The wording overlaps with the “Elimination of life unworthy of life” (Action T4 programme) which was conducted under the Nazi regime. The criteria for the “worth” here was thought as the ability to work or the degree of burden on society. The incident in Sagamihara reminds us of such concept of eugenics. Not only that, it also denies the statement “A society that excludes people with disabilities is weak and fragile,” once declared by the UN, as well as the provision “Every person with disabilities has a right to respect for his or her physical and mental integrity on an equal basis with others,” (Article 17) provided in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

Although this incident is an extremely anomalous case, I would like to dare to see it by overlapping it with the reality of Japanese society. The modern society is, simply put, on “a steep slope toward a stratified society and a society of intolerance,” and people who feel a sense of stagnation or uncertainty seem to be on the increase. In such circumstances, distortion and strain in the society and the economy are reaching, intensively and cumulatively, the people who are socially disadvantaged. I think the civil society at large should sincerely face the question of whether or not such a transformation of social structures is irrelevant to the incident, and continue asking the question.

The suspect reportedly has a record of involuntary admission to a mental hospital. Verification is required on the process of facts including if the medical support was appropriate. At the same time, what should be strongly warned against is jumping too-quickly to the

strengthening of social defense measures. There is a press report to the effect that “The Government will examine the way how the system of involuntary admission should be,” but I cannot agree to hasty measures of symptomatic treatment that are lacking in substance. A shortsighted policy without substance will bring new confusion to policies relevant to mental disability, and is nothing but a means to foster prejudice and discrimination against persons with mental disability. Policy approaches to link the incident and “reviewing of the policy” should not be repeated.

Furthermore, the idea of emphasizing security measures does not sit well with me, either. Of course, the security measures should not be downplayed, but their intent is realized only when they are emphasized along with the dramatic improvements in conditions for people with disabilities to live in the community. The emphasis of security measures alone could become a new opportunity to strengthen the isolation from the community; therefore, even though they may be emergency measures, they should not go against the major current of transition “from institutions to community.”

We strongly request for the thorough investigation into the truth of the case, in which the focus is first placed on the suspect to find out his words and deeds and his motive. On that basis, calm and rigorous verification should be conducted from all conceivable angles as to whether there were any inadequacies on site and whether there were any political or administrative weaknesses and blind spots, in terms of the occurrence and expansion of the incident.

Furthermore, I’m concerned that the names of the victims are not disclosed in news reports. In Japan when a person dies in an accident or incident, the name of the victim is released as a rule. When we join our hands in prayer, we usually do so thinking of each person by the name and his/her personality. Under the current circumstances where the names and the relevant information are not known, however, I think it would be difficult to mourn the death of each individual victim. I feel very uncomfortable with this situation in the light of socially accepted ideas.

Psychological trauma is experienced by all the people with disabilities across Japan, including people with intellectual disabilities and mental disabilities, not to mention stakeholders of “Tsukui Yamayuri En.” Similarly, the incident exerted an immeasurable impact on the family members. We ask people with disabilities and their families not to be daunted but raise your head up and lead your life as usual. Also, those who support them are asked to treat people with disabilities and their families with courtesy and make sure to provide them with specific, individualized support. We also call on people in the community to treat them in a way no different than usual.

The lives of the nineteen persons are irreversible. There are, however, things we can do. That is, we can make this incident a new opportunity to create an inclusive society (a society without discrimination), where all people are valued. We are committed to pursue it together with everyone in the civil society and, at the same time, take the initiative in addressing this issue more than ever.