

Japan: Racism deliberately concealed for 100 years

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Last year, 2023, marked the 100th anniversary of the genocide of Koreans living in Japan following the Great Kanto Earthquake. The earthquake was a disaster of unprecedented scale, killing 105,000 people. Immediately after the earthquake, rumors such as “Koreans poisoned the well” and “Koreans attack with weapons” circulated in the disaster area. And in the confusion, about 6,000 Koreans were killed.

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Although the killings were targeted at Koreans, the victims included Chinese, Japanese who were mistaken for Koreans, and Communists. These groundless rumors were deliberately spread by the Japanese government at that time. The reason for this was the discrimination and prejudice against Koreans in Japanese society. However, these rumors were amplified by the Japanese citizens, the state, and the newspapers, which escalated the murderous acts of the Koreans. The killings were carried out by the police, the military, and the vigilante groups formed by Japanese citizens who believed the rumors and armed themselves with Japanese swords, hunting rifles, and other weapons.

Today, we cannot dismiss this tragedy as “something that happened 100 years ago.” This is because every time disaster occurs, the rumors similar to “Koreans poisoned the well” circulate in the affected areas threaten the lives of foreigners and minorities.

Japan is one of the most earthquake-prone countries in the world, with approximately 20 per cent of the world’s earthquakes of magnitude 6 or greater occurring near Japan. This country has experienced major earthquakes every few years or decades. Such a tragedy can occur at any time in the country when the society is highly stressed not only by earthquakes but also by non-seismic disasters such as the Covid-19 crisis.

In the past decade, we have witnessed many incidents caused by racism, which is deeply rooted in Japan. The targets of racist attacks in the disaster were all the oppressed people. Foreigners and minorities were also the main targets of attacks during the March-11 earthquake of 2011. Following the magnitude 7.6 earthquake of New Year’s Day that hit Japan near the Noto Peninsula in the Ishikawa Prefecture, the Internet is already littered with groundless rumors attacking others. Rumors are already circulating openly on the Internet, as if sexual minorities were potential criminals in the disaster area. Their rhetoric is very similar to that of xenophobic nationalism.

Attacks against foreigners and minorities in disasters

Similar vicious rumors against foreigners and minorities like “Koreans poisoned the well” still circulate after every major disaster. When the March-11 earthquake occurred in 2011, the following rumors were spread in the disaster area: “Foreign theft groups are rampant” and “Foreigners are stealing money and goods from the dead bodies”. [1] And not long after that, there were calls on the Internet for the formation of neighborhood vigilante groups.

In response, the Japanese authorities were forced to deny the rumors by distributing flyers stating that there was no such fact. Surprisingly, the survey of 944 people in the disaster area and Tokyo showed that about 50% of the respondents had “heard” the groundless rumor that “foreigners are committing crimes”. And more than 80% of respondents said they “‘largely’ or ‘somewhat’ believed” them. [2] At the time of the 2016 Kumamoto earthquake, there were also posts on social networking sites that Koreans living in Kumamoto had poisoned wells. In disasters, the present writer always feels rather uncomfortable. This is when we hear the following words from the media or officials of educational institutions during disasters: “The Japanese are behaving in an orderly fashion.”

Behind the groundless rumors “foreigners are committing crimes” that have been circulating in the disaster areas is the Japanese sense of “being chosen people”. However, foreigners and minorities who are subject to the whims of the Japanese would rather have their lives threatened by racism. It is also extremely difficult to counter misinformation once it has been spread, especially in disaster areas where the communications infrastructure has been destroyed.

Outlet for frustration increased by the Covid-19 crisis

Attacks against the oppressed people have also intensified in the Covid-19 crisis since late 2019. Yokohama Chinatown, one of Japan’s leading Chinatowns, has received an endless stream of slanderous phone calls, letters, e-mails, and graffiti since the infection began to spread throughout Japan. They said, “The Chinese must leave Japan as soon as possible” and “Stop spreading the virus”.

In the years that followed, countless vicious rumors about foreigners and minorities living in Japan also circulated on social networking sites. Attacks on Koreans in Japan (Korean-Japanese) [3], who have traditionally been the targets of the most racist attacks in Japan, were also fierce. The endless hate speech that denies human dignity and even threatens lives has made foreigners living in Japan tremble with fear. Comparing Japanese and Chinese/Korean surnames, most of the former are composed of two Chinese characters, while most of the latter are composed of a single Chinese character. At that time, many of my foreign friends with one-character surnames tried to remove or hide the nameplates on the gates of their houses. Then an incident happened. The fears of these foreigners in Japan became reality.

In 2021, a Japanese racist set fire to empty houses in a community of Korean residents in Kyoto Prefecture. Seven houses and other buildings were destroyed by arson. The perpetrator who was arrested and charged had committed the crime just 10 days after reading a rumor on the Internet that Koreans in the area were illegally occupying the land. The perpetrator said that he had been forced to quit his job just before the incident because of the Covid-19 crisis, and that he set the fire to distract himself from his worries about his job. At that time, the impact of this incident on those involved was enormous. This was because this incident targeted places where Koreans lived, which was fundamentally different from the traditional targeting of landmarks such as ethnic Korean groups and banks.

Racist violence fueled by “justice”

Most of the above attacks on the oppressed people were provoked by racism that is deeply rooted in Japanese society. Incidents in recent disasters such as the earthquakes and the Covid-19 crisis have all been accompanied by intense anxiety, fear, and unrest, and anger directed at foreigners and other minorities. We have to admit that Japanese society is burdened with the same aggression toward foreigners and minorities that was common to the tragedy of a century ago. However, the scenes of racists attacking were not only seen in disaster situations.

For the past decade, far-right racists have marched in the Japanese capital and other cities shouting “Kill both good and bad Koreans”. There are also far-right forces that praise the persecution of Jews. At first, there were demonstrations of hate. Later, the hatred turned into mass violence. What made ordinary Japanese youths say, “I will kill Koreans,” is reactionary madness of racism. Racism causes the worst violence. And their words and actions are based on a kind of “justice”. The worst racism and violence have been instigated by seemingly plausible racist “justice” such as “protecting women and children” and “protecting Japanese society”. The official name of Zaitokukai, a leading racist organization in Japan, is “Association of Citizens against the Special Privileges of the Zainichi”. [4]

But it is the Koreans, an oppressed ethnic minority, who have been subjected to violence by their oppressors in Japan. And there is no such thing as “the Special Privileges”. With the establishment of a relationship of oppression, violence has already begun. Never in history has violence been initiated by the oppressed. [5]

We are against racism, discrimination and xenophobia toward all the oppressed

Racism is only visible when there is a social norm of anti-racism in contrast. The Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, which spread around the world in 2020, made the presence of racism in American society visible. It is unnecessary to say that racism has always existed in Japan. Discrimination against Koreans, Ainu, and Okinawa is all racism. All of those discriminations have been officially recognized as racial discrimination by the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, which has recommended the enactment of a comprehensive anti-discrimination law.

However, racism in Japanese society has been deliberately concealed by successive right-wing and conservative governments. Japanese governments have deliberately failed to investigate or even keep proper statistics on the frequent incidents of racial discrimination in Japan. This is very different from countries like the US and the UK where the government publishes hate crime statistics. In addition, there have been no social norms to fight against discrimination in the country. And there is no democratic rule in the country. Laws that should exist as a matter of course to prohibit discrimination are strongly opposed and not enacted. Protecting the rights of victims and prohibiting discriminatory acts are closely connected with each other in combating discrimination. It is only because anti-racism denies the perpetrators’ “freedom to discriminate” as social justice that it can counter the “justice of racism”. There is no social justice that can counter racism in a society that seeks to protect the human rights of victims only to the extent that it protects the perpetrators’ “freedom to discriminate”.

In the country, the united front movement against racism was built almost exclusively by ethnic minorities such as Koreans with very weak financial bases. However, it is only the oppressed who, by freeing themselves, can free their oppressors. The latter, as an oppressive class, can free neither others nor themselves. It is therefore essential that the oppressed wage the struggle to resolve the

contradiction in which they are caught. [6] All the oppressed must unite and stand together to fight racism for our own liberation. Confronting racism and eradicating xenophobic discrimination from society is an urgent task for populations in Japan today.

KAREN YAMANAKA

Footnotes

[1] At the time of writing, these two groundless rumors that circulated the March-11 earthquake of 2011 are now spreading again on social networking sites after the New Year's Day earthquake this year.

[2] The Mainichi Newspapers, 13 March 2017: "80% believed fake rumors of crime by foreigners in Japan after quake: poll."

[3] The background of racism is explained in the historical context of colonization or immigration. Korean-Japanese can be explained in terms of these two contexts.

[4] "Zainichi"/Korean-Japanese means Koreans and their descendants who came to Japan under Japanese colonial rule and continued to live in Japan after the defeat in the World War II.

[5] Paulo Freire, "Pedagogy of the Oppressed".

[6] Paulo Freire, "Pedagogy of the Oppressed".