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Top court upholds acquittal of ex-AUM cult member in bombing case

Mainichi Japan (27.12.2017) --
<https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20171227/p2g/00m/0dm/040000c> - The Supreme Court has upheld a lower court ruling that acquitted former AUM Shinrikyo cult member Naoko Kikuchi over her role in a 1995 parcel bombing at the Tokyo metropolitan government building.

Rejecting an appeal filed by prosecutors, the top court's First Petty Bench said in its decision dated Monday the Tokyo District Court's 2014 ruling that she was guilty of assisting in attempted murder was based on an error, and it endorsed the Tokyo High Court's 2015 decision overturning the lower court's verdict.

Kikuchi's acquittal will be finalized if prosecutors do not file an objection by Thursday. Ryoichi Nakahara, a trial chief at the Supreme Public Prosecutors Office, said, "It is truly regrettable that our claim was not accepted but we take the top court's decision sincerely."

After 17 years on the run, Kikuchi, 46, was arrested in June 2012 and later indicted over her role in the parcel bombing in May 1995, two months after the subway gas attack that killed 13 people and made more than 6,000 others ill.

AUM members sent a parcel containing a bomb to the metropolitan government head office, resulting in an explosion that seriously injured a Tokyo government employee.

With the effective conclusion of Kikuchi's trial, a series of trials of AUM Shinrikyo cult members has now ended, except for one involving Katsuya Takahashi, 59, accused of murder in the group's 1995 sarin nerve gas attack on the Tokyo subway system.

Takahashi, who had also been on the run for 17 years, was sentenced to life in prison by district and high courts but has appealed the rulings.

Kikuchi is the second person to be fully acquitted among those accused in a series of AUM-linked crimes.

The bombing that she was alleged to have facilitated was intended to disrupt a police investigation into the cult and prevent the arrest of AUM founder Shoko Asahara, whose real name is Chizuo Matsumoto.

A key point of contention in Kikuchi's trial was whether she was aware of the possibility that the chemicals she carried to one of the cult's hideouts would be used to kill or harm people.

She had pleaded not guilty, saying she "didn't know" that, while no direct evidence was ever produced.

In a lay-judge trial at the Tokyo District Court, Kikuchi was sentenced to five years in prison, but the top court ruled that the lower court's process of inferring her awareness was "illogical."

Masaaki Utsumi, 66, the Tokyo government employee who lost all the fingers and thumb on his left hand in the parcel explosion, said in a statement after the top court's decision that he thinks the passage of time has made it difficult to verify the facts.

"I think the passage of 20 years has made the truth of the incident easily forgotten and prevented a trial from properly verifying guiltiness," he said. Utsumi said he is concerned that people's memory of the case itself will fade as time goes on.

Utsumi was injured when he opened a booklet in which a bomb was set as he was checking mail addressed to then Tokyo Gov. Yukio Aoshima at the governor secretary room.

Yuji Nakamura, a lawyer at a support group for victims of crimes committed by the AUM Shinrikyo cult, warned the religious body is still active and teaches its members that the criminal cases were concocted and cult leader Matsumoto on death row is not guilty.

"The cult should not utilize the latest Supreme Court decision as a proof (of its argument)," he said.

Kikuchi joined AUM Shinrikyo in 1989 and served as a poster girl for the cult by running in marathon races to advertise the group.

She was later placed on the wanted list on suspicion of murder in the 1995 sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway system. While on the run, Kikuchi lived under a false name and worked at warehousing and nursing care service companies.

When Kikuchi was arrested in June 2012 in Sagami-hara, Kanagawa Prefecture, she was living with a man who was never an AUM member.

She was indicted only for her role in the parcel bombing at the Tokyo metropolitan government building as prosecutors did not build a case against her for involvement in the subway attack.

During the lay judge trial at the Tokyo District Court that began in May 2014, Kikuchi said she fled and lived as a fugitive because she feared "being judged unfairly" after seeing AUM "colleagues who knew nothing" found guilty in trials.

Following the high court's ruling that acquitted her, she apologized to Utsumi, the man injured by the explosion, saying in a statement, "It is true that bombing made from chemicals that I carried caused severe damage to someone who has no fault. I deeply apologize."

Former Aum cultist publishes memoir on gas attacks, Asahara

A former executive of the Aum Shinrikyo cult who helped manufacture the sarin gas that killed 13 people and sickened more than 6,000 on the Tokyo subway system in 1995 has published a memoir.

By Eiji Shimura

World-Wide Religious News (10.01.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2iKhHUT> - In it, Tomomasa Nakagawa, 54, a former medical doctor and now death-row inmate, reveals the method used by the cult to manufacture the deadly nerve gas and also discusses former Aum leader Shoko Asahara, whom he cared for.

"He was a criminal before (being regarded as) a religious leader in that he transformed a religious organization into a criminal enterprise," Nakagawa noted about Asahara, whose real name is Chizuo Matsumoto.

Matsumoto, 61, is also on death row.

Nakagawa published the memoir in the November issue of Gendai Kagaku (Chemistry Today), urged by Anthony Tu, professor emeritus at Colorado State University and an authority of toxicology.

Tu, who wrote a book on the subway attacks and also a 1994 sarin attack in Matsumoto, Nagano Prefecture, that killed eight people and sickened about 600, has interviewed Nakagawa many times.

The cultist, whose death sentence was finalized in 2011, was involved in both sarin atrocities and also the abduction and murders of anti-Aum lawyer Tsutsumi Sakamoto and his family members in 1989.

At the beginning of the memoir, whose main theme was "Why was (Aum) able to manufacture sarin?" Nakagawa apologizes to victims of the series of crimes committed by Aum cultists.

As for Asahara's skill as a leader of yoga and meditation sessions, Nakagawa writes, "His capability was extremely high."

"There were no people who joined Aum to commit murders. Including me, those who put absolute trust in Asahara in the fields of yoga and meditation became involved in the (fatal) incidents," Nakagawa recalls.

He also reveals the chemical formulas he says were used to manufacture the sarin, which the cult began producing in around 1992.

In January 1995, the media reported that police suspected Aum was behind the sarin attack in Matsumoto. The gas was sprayed in a residential area in June the previous year.

Aum members hurriedly disposed of several hundreds of tons of sarin and other chemical substances to prevent police from finding the stockpile, Nakagawa writes in the memoir.

"All of us were poisoned by sarin (while doing that). I was just about able to stand," he recalls.

The sarin attacks on the Tokyo subway system were carried out on March 20, 1995.

Nakagawa was one of the cultists who manufactured it, utilizing chemicals that were not disposed of in the January clearing out.

Nakagawa said in court that Yoshihiro Inoue, 47, also a former Aum executive and a death-row inmate, was responsible for storing the chemicals.

However, in a court ruling on a different former executive of Aum, it was stated keeping the chemicals was Nakagawa's job.

"Whatever the reason, terrorism is always intolerable," the memoir reads.

It concludes with, "The background (of the act) of joining dangerous religious or terrorist organizations and the background (of the act) of carrying out terror acts after joining those organizations should be distinguished."

Minoru Kariya, 56, the eldest son of Kiyoshi, a notary public who was also abducted and killed by Aum in 1995 at the age of 68, said that many bereaved families still have questions after listening to the remarks made by various Aum members in court.

"If former executives of Aum release their memoirs, it could help clarify the facts (of the series of crimes committed by the organization)," said Kariya, who has repeatedly interviewed Inoue and Nakagawa.
