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Japan police launch big raid against Aum Shinri Kyo cult

KAMIKUISHIKI, Japan (AP) — Thousands of police launched simultaneous dawn raids Tuesday on compounds of the Aum Shinri Kyo cult nationwide to arrest the group's leader and 20 members in connection with the Tokyo subway gas attack.

Police said they planned to charge the group's half-blind, guru-like leader Shoko Asahara and a score of his followers with murder or attempted murder in the attack that left a dozen people dead and 5,500 others sickened.

Asahara was believed to be hiding at the cult's compound here at the foot of Mount Fuji, although his presence had not been confirmed nearly two hours after the raids began.

Hundreds of officers raided the Kamikuishiki compound, and 130 other sites were simultaneously being raided across Japan, said Shigeaki Ishikawa, a Tokyo Metropolitan Police spokesman. At least 2,000 police were involved.

"We have obtained evidence that the sect has produced sarin within its compound and discovered its members who were involved in the attacks on the

subways," said Ishikawa, a chief detective. Sarin is the nerve gas that permeated the subway.

The move against Asahara has been long anticipated while police painstakingly built their case in Japan's biggest-ever investigation. More than 200 of Asahara's followers have been arrested since the March 20 subway attack, but all on charges unrelated to it.

Officials were clearly fearful that the raids would spark a violent reaction from cult followers, although there were no initial reports of resistance to the raids.

"I feel extremely nervous. I sincerely hope the arrests will be conducted with no major difficulty or confusion," chief government spokesman Kozo Igarashi told reporters.

Cabinet members met in emergency session to discuss the progress of the police strikes.

"The most important thing now is to prevent further terrorist attacks from recurring," said Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama.

At Kamikuishiki, police used power saws to cut their way into the buildings of the compound. Several dozen police rushed in,

but did not immediately emerge.

A massive media contingent looked on as the raids began. Television offered blanket coverage of the police strikes, frenetically cutting from helicopter footage of various sites to reporters providing live reports from cult facilities.

Media reports said a total of 41 warrants were issued Monday night charging Asahara and others with murder or attempted murder. They said some of those named already were in custody on other charges.

The two months since the subway attack have been a time of turmoil and soul-searching in Japan. The gassing and a series of mysterious and violent incidents that followed have profoundly altered its self-image as a safe nation.

In the latest scare, five people suffered coughing fits Monday night from fumes at a train station in Yokohama, just south of Tokyo. Three people were being treated at hospitals, but their condition was not serious, authorities said.

Police suspected that several similar incidents in previous weeks may have been pranks inspired by the subway attack.

Death toll from Ebola virus rises

KINSHASA, Zaire (AP) — The death toll from the killer Ebola virus surged Monday as health officials hunted for a riverboat captain and a nurse who may have brought the epidemic to the Zairian capital, a crowded city of 6 million.

Authorities fear the two could frustrate their attempts to contain the virus to the region surrounding Kikwit, the city 370 miles east of Kinshasa where the outbreak began in March.

Seventeen new Ebola deaths were confirmed Monday along with four new cases of Ebola, all of them in Kikwit, the World Health Organization said in Geneva.

That brought the total of confirmed cases to 84. Of those, 77 have died, including a fourth Italian nun who was caring for Ebola patients at Kikwit General Hospital.

There is no vaccine or cure for Ebola, which kills 80 percent of those who contract it, usually within days.

Health workers were moving into the area around

Kikwit to teach people how to avoid Ebola and to search street-by-street for new victims.

In addition to Kikwit, cases have been confirmed in the villages of Musango, Vanga, Yassa Bonga and Kenge, according to an international committee overseeing the response to the outbreak.

Dr. Abdou Moudi, WHO's representative in Zaire, had only sketchy details on the two individuals who may have carried Ebola into Kinshasa.

The riverboat captain was treated for bloody diarrhea at a Kinshasa hospital and released before doctors realized his symptoms were similar to those for Ebola, Moudi said.

The captain was among hundreds of people who work on the Congo River, a major transportation link between Kinshasa and the interior.

Moudi said that the nurse may have been in contact with infected individuals in Kikwit and was now in Kinshasa.

Health officials were searching for both to test them for the virus.

Cease-fire ends; Chechnya battle grows

GROZNY, Russia (AP) — Using artillery, rockets and warplanes, Russia has ground forward relentlessly with its scorched-earth policy in rebel Chechnya, leaving civilian dead and villages burning in its wake.

Over the weekend, Russian Defense Minister Gen. Pavel Grachev said the war in Chechnya would continue "as long as necessary, until the bandits realize their situation is hopeless."

Fighting in the breakaway republic intensified almost immediately after a oft-ignored unilateral cease-fire declared by Moscow expired last week.

President Boris Yeltsin

announced the truce in an attempt to deflect international criticism from Russia's bloody campaign during Victory Day celebrations and the U.S.-Russia summit in Moscow.

As was expected, the departure of the last foreign leader brought a new Russian assault.

Thousands of civilians have died since Russian troops poured into Chechnya in December to crush its drive for independence. Yeltsin has dismissed the conflict as little more than a police operation to mop up Chechen guerrillas. On the battlefield, however, Russian troops use combat helicopters,

tanks and rocket launchers to ferret out lightly armed but well-hidden Chechen fighters in the wooded foothills of the northern Caucasus Mountains.

Nightly skirmishes in the Chechen capital Grozny have left Russia uncertain of its hold on the republic. Moscow already fears rebel infiltration inside the areas controlled by its temporary administration.

Russia's continued use of large-scale force bodes ill for a quick end to the conflict, said Gersolt Elmurzayev, a senior Chechen official speaking inside the bullet-scarred temporary administration building in central Grozny.

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