Japan's Urban Underside Erupts, Tarnishing Image of Social Peace

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OSAKA, Japan, Oct. 10 — On the surface, most Japanese view their country as a classless society prizing harmony and consensus among its many contending forces. Every once in a while, however, an incident occurs that exposes stresses, conflicts and anti-social behavior underneath the placid exterior.

For five nights last week, 2,500 police officers battled as many as 1,500 rock-throwing rioters in Airin, a seedy neighborhood of Osaka. Several buildings, including the rail depot, were burned, at least 55 people were arrested and about 200 injured in the worst rioting in Japan in nearly 20 years. The violence has subsided, but residents say it can recur because nothing has been done about the police harassment and corruption that is at the heart of their grievances.

"The police treat us like garbage," said Masaru Kikuchi, a 46-year-old part-time construction worker. "Whenever someone gets drunk, he gets slapped in the face or arrested. They pick us up for gambling, but they never arrest the gangsters who are running the gambling dens."

Most of Japan's major cities have neighborhoods of grizzled laborers and derelicts living in $10-a-night flop-houses, with grimy back streets reeking of urine and alcohol. But the riots here have made Airin a new symbol of the grim underside of Japan's economic boom.

It is also one of the highest-crime districts in Japan, a place where organized gangs flourish and police power is everywhere. In Airin, crime syndicates known as yakuza have 45 known storefront offices, from which they run gambling operations, extortion schemes and businesses that supply laborers to construction companies in Osaka.

Airin residents say the police never arrest the gangsters themselves when they carry out periodic crackdowns on gangster-run gambling operations. Evidence that police officers are on

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yakuza payrolls seemed to many to come on Oct. 2, when a policeman was arrested on bribery charges.

“Thathand is the only one who is on the take,” a gray-haired man sitting on a stool in a neighborhood park said this week. “Yakuza are bad people, but yakuza have to make a living. The police are worse than yakuza, because they’re making money off the crimes they are supposed to prevent.”

In Airin, an even more despised symbol of police control is the presence of 16 television cameras mounted on poles above the seedy alleys and streets, monitoring them 24 hours a day. The cameras give the streets an eerie Orwellian quality, and a citizen’s movement attempting to have them removed has been thwarted. But the police praise their usefulness—“They’re especially helpful in a riot situation,” said Inspector Renato Ataka of the local police station.

Criticism of the Monarchy

According to residents, the incident that triggered the violence began on the same day as the corruption arrest, when an old man with a German sheep-dog brough a bullhorn to the office of a radical left-wing group known as the Kamagasaki Day Laborers’ Union and gave a speech criticizing the upcoming enthronement ceremony of Emperor Akihito.

As a crowd gathered to listen to the speaker, the police, noticing the reaction on a television monitor, sent officers to find out what was going on. Stills came out and, according to the police, the dog bit three people. The old man and his dog were taken to the station.

Enflamed by the earlier corruption arrest of the policeman, a dozen people descended on the police station, demanding release of the man, throwing rocks and shouting, “Shame! Shame!” The confrontation deepened that

evening, continuing through the night.

Hundreds of rioters participated in the initial phases, but the number grew to 1,000 by the end of the week.

Members of the Kamagasaki Day Laborers’ Union said in interviews that their organization had 59 members in the area, but about 1,000 sympathizers who formed the core of the rioters.

“We have a lot to say to the police,” said Toshiaki Fujii, a spokesman for the union. “But usually we tend to go in a group and tend to get drunk and are not taken very seriously.”

On the third night of the rioting, residents said they noticed large contingents of young people in violent motorcycle gangs known as boso- zuku. The boso- zuku, known as training camps for eventual yakuza, were said to have recognized the opportunity to bash a few police officers.

Press-Police Relationship

The public relations division of the Osaka Police Department declined a request for an interview, saying that it would only grant interviews to Japanese reporters who regularly cover the department. Such an approach is common in Japan, and in figure in leftists’ charges that the reporters in Japan have an overreaction to violence, the police and suppress criticism of them.

The Airin neighborhood has actually been a troubled area for decades, and its residents are said to be far better off than they were years ago.

Osaka, known as the worst rioting region in modern times, was in this neighborhood in 1961, when one person was killed and many others severely injured. After that violence, the Osaka government established a program according to the police and suppress criticism of them.

Experts on organized crime say that:

Osaka unrest belies Japan’s image of social harmony.

The rioters, they’re still doing the kind of jobs other people don’t like to do.” They added that “these workers don’t really know how to control their budgets, and the tend to spend everything they earn on gambling or alcohol. They have few families, they feel isolated, and alienated from society.”

Despite the Government programs, they see no sign of declining yakuza influence. The National Police Agency says that there are 86,000 gangsters in Japan, far fewer than 10 years ago, but that their aggregate income has skyrocketed to about $10 billion a year.

Osaka, and western Japan generally, is said to be the center of Japanese organized crime, which is dominated by the Yamaguchi syndicate. Gangsters are often found in gambling, but it seems to have been quiet this year.

In July, a man who had recently moved into a apartment one day was shot by two gangsters, who apparently mistook him for the previous tenant. In an effort to evict the tenants in Osaka a demand crackdown, and as a result more yakuza have been arrested this year.

According to news accounts, the crackdown was the result of an increase in the number of yakuza who have been arrested for corruption charges.

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