Japan’s Death Penalty Process Is Shrouded in Secrecy

Charles Lane

Charles Lane is a staff writer at The Washington Post. In the following viewpoint, Lane notes that Japanese executions are kept secret. Even condemned prisoners are not told when they will die—a practice which some suggest is a form of psychological torture. Lane also says that few safeguards exist to protect accused criminals when they are taken into custody. Japanese executions are also on the rise. Lane notes that human rights organizations have protested, but the Japanese strongly support executions.

As you read, consider the following questions:
1. According to Charles Lane, how do the names of those executed in Japan leak to the public?
2. What is the minimum hanging period prescribed by law in Japan?
3. According to Lane, why don’t anti-death penalty forces want to start a debate about hanging as a method of execution?

Tamaki Mitsui was a bit surprised one Friday when his boss gave him his instructions for the following Monday: to serve as a witness at two hangings. Mitsui, an official of the

Charles Lane, “A View to a Kill,” Foreign Policy Online, May–June 2005. Copyright © 2008 Foreign Policy. All rights reserved. Reproduced by permission.
Nagoya High Court Prosecutor’s Office, which handles criminal appeals, had argued for the death penalty in three cases himself. He knew that Japanese law requires representatives of the prosecutor’s office to witness executions. But he had thought this duty would be assigned by lottery. Still, he accepted it. Part of the job, he thought.

When Monday came, Mitsui took a subordinate with him to the Nagoya Detention Center. It is one of seven Japanese jails where capital offenders await execution—and then go to the gallows. Shortly after 9 o’clock in the morning, Mitsui, his deputy, the director of the detention center, and another prison official sat in a row behind a floor-to-ceiling glass barrier. On the other side of the glass was the death chamber: an empty room, about 18 feet square, with bare white walls and a polished floor of light brown Japanese cypress wood. Dangling from the ceiling, illuminated by floodlights, was a noose. The only sound was the prerecorded chanting of a Buddhist sutra. Mitsui found the setting oddly serene. “It’s bizarre to say this, but it was a beautiful place,” he recalls, “like a Noh [a form of classic Japanese drama] theater.”

Then, a set of double doors on the far side of the execution chamber swung open. The prisoner, escorted by a pair of guards, walked in.