

Assassin of Japan's Ex-Leader, Denied Leniency, Is Given Life in Prison

Church a Motive In Abe's Murder

By JAVIER C. HERNÁNDEZ and HISAKO UENO

NARA, Japan — More than three years after Shinzo Abe, Japan's longest-serving prime minister, was gunned down in broad daylight at a campaign stop — a rare and shocking act of political violence in the country — a man was sentenced on Wednesday to life in prison for his murder.

The sentencing of the man, Tetsuya Yamagami, 45, in the city of Nara, however, prompted a mix of reactions — a reflection of the complicated feelings many people in Japan have about his case.

For some, he is a calculating assassin who committed an unspeakable act: murdering Mr. Abe, 67, one of the most influential figures in modern Japanese history, outside a Nara train station in 2022.

For others, Mr. Yamagami, who was unemployed and had briefly served in Japan's military, is a sympathetic figure whose actions were understandable because of his difficult childhood. His family faced economic hardship, and his father and brother both died by suicide.

In delivering the sentence in district court, Judge Shinichi Tanaka called Mr. Yamagami's actions "despicable and extremely malicious." The judge acknowledged Mr. Yamagami's troubled childhood but said that he was now an adult who was "aware of the seriousness of taking the victim's life." He was found guilty of several crimes, including murder and violating gun control laws.

In the courtroom, Mr. Yamagami looked down and did not visibly react as the sentence was read. He wore a black turtleneck, chinos and blue sandals. His hair was tied in a bun. On the final day of testimony last month, Mr. Yamagami apologized for killing Mr. Abe, who stepped down as prime minister in 2020.

Mr. Yamagami's guilt was never in dispute; he had admitted at the start of the trial in October to shooting Mr. Abe in the neck with a homemade gun while he was stumping for a junior politician.

"Everything is true," Mr. Yamagami told the court in October.

Kiuko Notoya contributed reporting from Tokyo.



THE ASAHI SHIMBUN, VIA GETTY IMAGES



KOKI OKADA/KYODO NEWS, VIA ASSOCIATED PRESS

Former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe campaigning in Nara, Japan, in 2022 before he was shot. At left, a vehicle carrying Tetsuya Yamagami, his killer, arriving at the courthouse on Wednesday.

Mr. Yamagami's mother's involvement with the Unification Church had placed a strain on him. The family's financial situation grew so dire, Mr. Yamagami said, that he had attempted suicide in 2005, hoping his siblings could make a life insurance claim.

Prosecutors pushed the court to impose a life sentence, saying that an assassination of a former state leader was a crime without precedent in modern Japanese history. They argued that the hardships of Mr. Yamagami's childhood were irrelevant.

The court, presided over by three judges, agreed. It said in the decision read by Judge Tanaka that "the defendant's upbringing did not have a significant impact on the crimes in this case." The consequences of Mr. Yamagami's actions were "grave," it said, noting that Mr. Abe's widow, Akie Abe, "continues to feel a great sense of loss at the loss of her husband."

Mr. Yamagami's representa-

tives said they were disappointed by the verdict and would consider an appeal.

Ms. Abe said that the ruling was a "turning point in the long days since my husband's sudden death."

"I hope that the defendant will face up to what he has done and atone for the crime of taking the life of my husband, my irreplaceable family member," she said in a statement, according to Japanese news reports.

The assassination brought renewed scrutiny to the Unification Church, which has long been an influential force in Japanese politics and society. After Mr. Abe's death, much of the public anger focused on the church's ties to politicians in the long-governing Liberal Democratic Party, of which Mr. Abe was a member. Responding to the outcry, the Japanese government investigated the church's fund-raising tactics.

A Tokyo court last year ordered that the Japanese branch of the

church be dissolved. The church has appealed the decision.

Critics of the church said the court should have shown more leniency.

"I had hoped that he would be given another chance at some point — an opportunity to contribute to society, an opportunity to atone for his sins in that way," said Shinichi Kamiya, a lawyer who represents descendants of church members, including those seeking damages for psychological harm. "In that sense, the court handed down a very heavy verdict."

The trial drew intense interest in Japan. The last time such a high-profile assassination occurred was in 1936, when two former prime ministers were killed during a coup by the Imperial Japanese Army.

In Nara, nearly 700 people lined up outside the courthouse on Wednesday, hoping to be among the 33 members of the public allowed inside the courtroom.

Yuriko Iida, 77, whose mother was a member of the Unification Church, stopped by the courthouse in Nara on Wednesday after watching news of the sentencing on television.

She said she felt that murder was wrong, no matter the circumstances. But she added that she believed Mr. Yamagami should receive a lighter sentence.

"There is a possibility that a life sentence can be overturned," she said. "The Unification Church also had its faults, which led him to decide to kill Mr. Abe."

Mr. Abe, who led Japan from 2006 to 2007 and from 2012 to 2020, was the scion of a staunchly nationalist family of politicians. While he was largely lionized on the global stage, he was more divisive in his home country.

As prime minister, he worked to unfetter Japan's military after decades of postwar pacifism, and he helped lift Japan out of its economic malaise through aggressive financial stimulus to boost spending. He was also a mentor to Japan's current prime minister, Sanae Takaichi, who shares many of his hard-line views.

In his testimony, Mr. Yamagami apologized to Mr. Abe's family.

"There is no doubt that my taking of his life has caused them immense suffering," he said, according to Japanese news reports. "Having lost a close relative myself, I know there is no excuse for what I have done. I am deeply sorry for the terrible thing I did."

Prince Harry Testifies Emotionally On '24-Hour Surveillance' by Tabloids

By LIZZIE DEARDEN

LONDON — Prince Harry became visibly emotional on Wednesday as he testified in London's High Court about the effects of what he called intrusive news coverage on his life and that of his wife, Meghan Markle.

Harry was giving evidence in his case against Associated Newspapers, the publisher of the British tabloids The Daily Mail and The Mail on Sunday. He and six other high-profile figures, including Elton John, have accused the company of phone hacking, obtaining personal records through deception and other forms of unlawful information gathering.

Associated Newspapers has denied all the accusations, saying that its articles about Harry were the result of legitimate journalistic work and the prince's "leaky" social circles.

Harry said in court that his yearslong legal battle with the company had been a "horrible experience."

"They continue coming after me; they have made my wife's life an absolute misery," he said, his voice cracking.

The articles at the center of the case, published between 2001 and 2013, reported intimate details of Harry's romantic relationships, his social activities and his feelings about his mother's death. He said reading them had been a "recurring traumatic experience."

Harry is the first well-known figure in the case to give evidence in the trial, which is scheduled to last more than two months.

In a written witness statement filed with the court, Harry said that the death of his mother, Princess Diana, while being chased by paparazzi in 1997 meant he had always had an "uneasy relationship" with the press, but that he was "conditioned to accept" constant coverage because of his role.

He said that the royal family had a policy of "never complain, never explain" over inaccurate and invasive articles, which he became "increasingly troubled by" after his relationship with Ms. Markle began.

Harry accused Associated Newspapers journalists, and private investigators acting on their behalf, of hacking his voice mail messages, tapping landline phone calls, "blagging" records — getting them through deception — and obtaining phone bills and pri-



PETER NICHOLLS/GETTY IMAGES

Prince Harry arriving to testify on Wednesday in London in his case against Associated Newspapers, publisher of two tabloids.

vate flight information. "Whenever I got on a plane, or in a car, I always expected I was being followed," he said. "I was under 24-hour surveillance."

The issue for the High Court to decide is whether — on the "balance of probabilities" — the specific articles in question were the product of unlawful information gathering.

In written arguments presented to the court, lawyers representing Associated Newspapers said that the social circles around Harry and the other claimants "were 'leaky'" and that their friends and associates "did regularly provide information to the press."

The company's lawyer Anthony White repeatedly asked Harry on Wednesday if it was possible that his associates had communicated with journalists at parties and other social occasions. Mr. White said the newspapers had obtained information from legitimate sources and reporting practices.

Harry denied that his friends were the source of the articles and accused journalists of "making up quotes to create a narrative and disguise the true source of information."

He challenged the basis of Mr. White's questions during a series of tense exchanges and was gently reprimanded by Judge Matthew Nicklin for "arguing the case" rather than answering questions in his role as a witness.

"You tend to argue back to the barrister about what he is putting to you," Judge Nicklin said. "Your role is simply to answer the questions as best as you can."

The judge said the evidence that Harry contested would be examined at a later stage of the trial, during questioning of witnesses including the journalists who wrote the articles and private investigators who worked for Associated Newspapers.

Harry's claim relates to 14 articles published in The Daily Mail and The Mail on Sunday, which he argues were the product of unlawful information gathering. One, published in July 2006 under the headline "LET HER REST IN PEACE," contained details of what the prince said were "confidential discussions" with his brother, Prince William, about the publication of a photograph of their dying mother in the Italian media.

Another article, published earlier that year, revealed details about Harry's relationship with his girlfriend then, Chelsy Davy, and her feelings about his joining the British Army. The prince argued that those details, including that he had called Ms. Davy "from a shop when choosing a costume outfit" could have come only from phone tapping. In his written statement, Harry said the article put "massive strain" on their relationship and created "paranoia and distrust."

The owners of The Daily Mirror, another tabloid, settled a claim over phone hacking in February 2024. Last January Rupert Murdoch's News Group Newspapers agreed to pay "substantial" damages to Harry and admitted for the first time to unlawful activities by private investigators working for The Sun.

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