

- **Where:** Tokyo (Japan);
- **When:** March 20, 1995;
- **What:** CBRN Agent Released: **Chemical;**
- **Who:** Actor(s) involved: non-state actors (members of the cult movement Aum Shinrikyo)
- **Why:** CBRN Event: (Domestic) Terrorist attack



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TOKYO SUBWAY SARIN ATTACK

Keywords: sarin gas – terrorist act – non-state actors – chemical weapon

The facts

On March 20, 1995, members of the Japanese ‘Aum Shinrikyo’ cult movement released sarin gas in the Tokyo subway (in five coordinated attacks on three train lines) because of ideological and religious convictions. The group, led by Shoko Asahara, had already carried out several assassinations and terrorist attacks using sarin, including the Matsumoto sarin attack nine months earlier. Immediate effects comprised the death of about thirteen people and at least 5,800 injured. Long-term health effects included, for instance, psychological issues or post-traumatic stress disorder as well as various eye symptoms and problems with psychomotor and memory functions.

Sarin (methyl phosphonofluoridic acid 1-methylethyl ester) nerve gas poisoning in Tokyo raised for the first time a real concern that terrorists would resort to WMDs in the form of CBRN attacks.

Domestic Legal response

With considerable public and political support, the Tokyo Public Prosecutor on June 30, 1995 petitioned the Tokyo District Court to order the dissolution of Aum Shinrikyo as a religious corporation. Representatives for Aum appealed the decision to the Tokyo High Court, but the earlier dissolution order was upheld and Aum Shinrikyo lost its legal status as religious corporation on December 19.

On December 8, 1995 (less than year after the subway incident), the Diet passed a bill to amend the Religious Corporations Law. Religious corporations were, *inter alia*, required to prepare an annual report, which must include a copy of the approved constitution, a list of officers, an inventory of financial assets, a record of financial transactions (profit/loss), a balance sheet, a description of properties and buildings, and documents related to business, enterprises under the corporation.

All but one of the 189 Aum members brought to trial were convicted and 13 were sentenced to hang, including founder Shoko Asahara. His trial began in April 1996 and lasted nearly eight years. In February 2004, the Tokyo District Court sentenced Asahara to hang, declaring he “committed the crimes in the process of realizing his fantasy of expanding the cult through militarization and to reign as its king in the name of salvation”.

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Related international legal tools:

- [Chemical Weapons Convention, 1997](#)

Further readings:

- WHO, [Public health response to biological and chemical weapons](#), 2004 (Appendix 4.2 ‘The Sarin Incidents in Japan’)
- OPCW, [The Sarin Gas Attack in Japan and the Related Forensic Investigation](#), 2001

Audio-visual materials:

- “A” (documentary film by Tatsuya Mori, 1998)
- “Me and the Cult Leader” (documentary film by Atsushi Sakahara, 2020)

Witness Reports:

- Haruki Murakami, *Underground: The Tokyo Gas Attack and the Japanese Psyche* (The Harvill Press 2001)

About this publication

This memo is the outcome of research carried out in the scope of the project CBRN-ITALY on International legal obligations related to Prevention, Preparedness, Response and Recovery from CBRN events and status of their implementation in Italy.

CBRN-ITALY has been funded by the Italian Ministry of Education, University and Research (MIUR) under the PRIN Programme (Progetti di Rilevante Interesse Nazionale) under grant n° 20175M8L32, with a duration of 36 months (March 2020 – February 2023). The research is carried out by four Universities: Scuola Superiore Sant’Anna, Institute of Law, Politics, Development (DIRPOLIS), Università di Bologna, Università di Firenze, Università di Torino.

The project aims at developing a common understanding of CBRN events and of actors involved (stage 1), at mapping obligations stemming from the wide range of applicable norms of International Law and European Union Law (stage 2), at exploring the implementation of applicable international obligations in Italy (stage 3) and at providing recommendations to address the gaps in the International, European and Italian legal and policy frameworks in all phases of the CBRN emergency management cycle (stage 4). The research activities are thus structured around four stages: 1. Definitions, 2. Mapping International and Regional Obligations, 3. Assessing the situation in Italy, 4. Providing recommendations.

For further information on the PRIN Project CBRN-ITALY, please visit:

<http://www.cbrn-italy.it/en>

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