



Sect planned deadly gas attacks in US

THE doomsday cult accused of carrying out a gas attack on the Tokyo underground planned to release ten tonnes of sarin nerve gas in Washington and New York, a former follower told Tokyo district court yesterday.

"If things had gone as planned, the Aum Shinrikyo would have released 50 tonnes of sarin in Tokyo and ten tonnes each in Washington and New York," Yoshihiro Inoue, the cult's self-styled intelligence minister, said.

By ROBERT WHYMAN

"We regarded the world outside as evil, and destroying the evil was salvation."

Earlier another cultist, Kazuo Konya, had told how recruits were told to drink the blood of Shoko Asahara, the alleged mastermind of the Tokyo underground gas attack in March 1995 which killed 12 people and injured thousands.

Mr Konya described an initiation rite for acolytes who were promised that drinking the guru's blood would bring them closer to salvation.

"We were taken to a room where

Asahara, dressed in orange, was sleeping. I was given a vial of a pinkish liquid, Asahara's blood. It tasted odd," he told the court.

Giving evidence at Mr Asahara's trial for murder, Mr Konya said that he was among 30 new members who paid a million yen (£5,000) for the ceremony at the cult's headquarters. "We were told it — drinking Asahara's blood — would clear our minds and bring us closer to a state of grace. It felt as if it had some effect, but later I realised it was hypnosis," he said.

Mr Asahara has refused to enter a plea on 16 counts, including the sarin gas murders and the 1989 killing of Tsutsumi Sakamoto, a lawyer, and his wife and child.

Mr Konya said that in 1989 he left the cult and sought Mr Sakamoto's help to sue the sect for the return of the money he paid to drink the Asahara's blood.

Soon afterwards, Mr Sakamoto, a marked man due to his vocal opposition to Aum, disappeared along with his wife and year-old son. Their remains were found buried in three separate locations in September 1995.

During his one-year trial, Mr Asahara has been ejected from the courtroom on three occasions for interrupting proceedings. His repeated outbursts and incoherent babbling have led the media to speculate about his sanity. (© The Times, London)

Floating Titanic sinking NY show

FOR once, the Titanic really was unsinkable.

The New York musical production "Titanic," based on the epic ocean liner disaster of 1912, had to cancel its preview this week because the ship wouldn't sink.

Last night's performance also was cancelled to work on what publicist Susanne Tighe described as complex technical aspects. "They need more time to get the movement of the ship right," she said.

The Titanic's running into an iceberg and sinking, onstage, are among the intended special effects of the multimillion-dollar production. Opening night is scheduled for April 23.

Peter Stone and Maury Yeston, the writer and composer, have described the theme of the show as the contrast between the rich passengers on the upper decks and the poor below.

Clinton fears cult copycats

Mass deaths spark warning on risk of new suicide wave

By IAN BRODIE

PRESIDENT Clinton made an impassioned plea to Americans yesterday to take steps to prevent any copycat versions of the mass suicide in California.

Describing the episode as sickening, heartbreaking and shocking, Mr Clinton said it was vital to discover why the 39 followers of Heaven's Gate killed themselves.

He said at the White House: "It's important we get as many facts as we can about this to try to determine what in fact motivated those people and what all of us can do to make sure that there aren't other people thinking in the same way out there in our country."

Pete Wilson, the Governor of California, summed up the mass suicide bluntly. "To call it bizarre is, I think, to understate it," he said.

Last night as the San Diego Coroner began identifying victims of the mass suicide, it emerged that they were not brainwashed youngsters but mostly middle-aged followers from across the United States.

Their guru, who was among the dead, was a former music professor who suffered a "near-death experience" in 1970 and went on to woo hundreds of disaffected Americans with a mix of pseudo-theology and UFO-worship.

The Heaven's Gate cult carried out a meticulous suicide plan at its rented mansion in the opulent San Diego suburb. All 39 went for a final meal at a local restaurant, then split into three groups to kill themselves in shifts over three days with a mix of vodka and barbiturates, and suffocation.

Their long explanations in print, video and cyberspace released last night described a mission to leave their earthly "vehicles" for a better life elsewhere in the cosmos.

Days before the mass suicide, the cult members explained in calm and sometimes cheerful tones why they were taking part. Appearing in pairs before a video camera at their estate, most expressed total confidence in the theory that their bodies were mere shells.

BEBUILDING

A white woman anticipated public bewilderment and expressed deep personal angst, however: "Maybe they're crazy for all I know," she said of her fellow disciples. "But I don't have any choice but to go for it, because I've been on this planet for 31 years and there's nothing here for me. I don't feel there was any way that anybody could say I was influenced by some strong personality."

The farewell video also contained group portraits of the 39, all in black, all with the short haircuts that led police to conclude initially that the suicide victims were young men. The known age range was 26 to 72, and their home states included not only California but also Arizona, Colorado, Texas, Florida, New Mexico, Minnesota, Utah, Ohio and Florida. (© The Times, London)

THE OBSESSION THAT LED TO MASS SUICIDE

THE CULT

Believing they were sent to Earth as angels, followers of Higher Source were non-smoking, non-drinking and celibate. Mostly young, they dressed alike in simple black outfits and led exemplary lives ruled by an elderly priest figure, Father John.



THE VISION

The computer-obsessed designed World-Wide-Websites, linking Internet users via satellite. They had become inspired by the Hale-Bopp comet, believing a UFO accompanying it had come to take them to another world.

Comet Hale-Bopp above California

THE MANSION

Their monastery was a £1 million mansion on an exclusive estate 20 miles north of San Diego. Surrounded by high walls, the building was packed with computer equipment. Other cult branches are said to be in New Mexico and Arizona.



THE TRAGIC RESULT

After making farewell videos the group seem to have committed mass suicide on Sunday when a lunar eclipse coincided with a clear comet sighting. Police found the bodies scattered around the building, each wearing black with purple shrouds over the upper body.

MAN, Graphics: Phil Argent / Jim Pavidis

Zany zealot surfed 'super-highway of death'

By RUTH GLEDHILL

THE Heaven's Gate cult was the last incarnation of a movement founded by Marshall H. Applewhite in 1975 with a nurse he met while in a psychiatric hospital.

Applewhite and Bonnie Lu Nettles, known as Bo and Peep or The Two by their followers, claimed to have been sent in a spaceship and offered guidance on how to attain a level beyond Earth.

In a feature common to cults, devotees of their California-based guru, Human Individual Metamorphosis, or HIM, had to give up their names and belongings and become celibate. HIM disbanded after prophecies failed to be fulfilled. Applewhite and Nettles were found to have convictions for car theft and credit card fraud. She later died.

Applewhite, the son of a Presbyterian minister, moved to Austin, Texas, where he took out full-page advertisements that

invited people to join his UFO cult, which also used the names Total Overcomers Anonymous and Higher Source. He offered a free videotape on which he appeared with two devotees.

According to "Tallyman", an Internet cult-watcher who ordered the tape, the two "had the most zoned-out look in their eyes I have ever seen. They were little more than vegetables, sitting there beside their pale god, hanging on his every word."

Applewhite featured in the May-June issue of UFO Magazine, now referring to himself as Do and Nettles as TI, titles styled on the musical alphabet and possibly inspired by the musical communication with

aliens in the film Close Encounters of the Third Kind.

The method of suicide chosen for followers by Do, or Father John Doe as he also called himself, is thought to have been linked to a song from The Sound of Music, in which he, "a drink with jam and bread," takes you back to Do. Names taken by other cult members are thought to have included Bo, So and Fah.

On the cult's Internet site Applewhite says: "I am in the same position in today's society as was the One that was in Jesus then... If you want to go to Heaven, I can take you through that gate — it requires everything of you."

The web site also contained a warning: "Planet about to be recycled — Your only chance to survive — Leave with us. Cult-watchers say the Internet lends

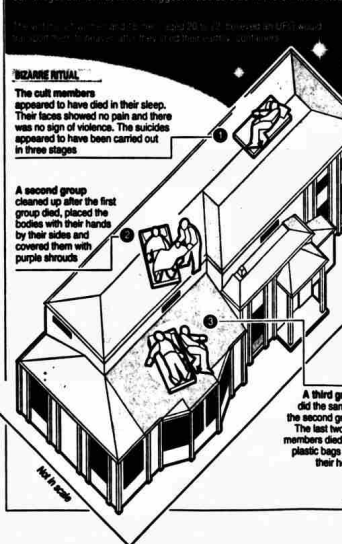
credibility to fringe groups by allowing them easily to spread their beliefs around the world. Just as the Bible aided the spread of Christianity, so the computer gives these neophyte religions the power of the Word.

The Internet was also used by the Japanese cult of Aum Shinrikyo, which was responsible for the poison gas attack on the Tokyo Underground in 1995. Tributes have been posted to David Koresh and his Branch Davidian followers, who died in a fire that ended the siege of their compound in Waco, Texas.

Like so many of unorthodox religious belief, members of the Heaven's Gate or Higher Source group had a pick-and-mix religious mentality which involved indiscriminate use of Christianity, science fiction and numerous other sources. (© The Times, London)

DEATH AT HEAVEN'S GATE

The Heaven's Gate cult members chose the luxury Rancho Santa Fe, in San Diego, California, for the biggest mass suicide in the United States.



'Introduce guillotine' call in US

A FLORIDA politician has demanded beheading as an alternative method of executing convicted killers in the wake of the botched electric chair execution in the State earlier this week.

State representative Victor Crist said he was considering legislation that would offer inmates a choice of execution styles — including the electric chair, the gas chamber, lethal injection, firing squad or the guillotine, the *St. Petersburg Times* reported.

"You laugh," the *Times* quoted Crist as saying. "But if you really want the least painful, most accurate method, it would be the guillotine."

Crist, Temple Terrace Republican, is chairman of the House Justice Council and sets criminal justice priorities in the state's House. The *Times* reported his fellow party members showed "some reluctance" to go along with the suggestion.

Crist's comments came in the wake of Tuesday's execution of convicted killer Pedro Medina. Flames leapt from the inmate's head when the switch on Florida's electric chair was thrown. It was the second time such an incident had occurred with "Old Sparky," Florida's electric chair.

Florida Attorney General Bob Butterworth asked the Legislature to consider changing the method of execution to lethal injection.

AIDS man denies infecting lover

A GREEK Cypriot fisherman yesterday pleaded not guilty to charges of infecting his former British lover with AIDS.

Janette Pink, who has developed full-blown AIDS, is due to testify in court on May 22 against Pavlos Georgiou, her ex-boyfriend who has the HIV virus that leads to AIDS.

Georgiou (40), from the resort of Ayia Napa, is accused of negligently infecting Pink with the virus while knowing he was a carrier during an affair in Cyprus between September 1993 and January 1996.

Mrs Pink, from Basildon, Essex, has accused Georgiou of failing to tell her about his condition during their affair. She also says he concealed the death of his wife from AIDS.

Alcopops sales set drinking record

ALCOHOLIC soft drinks — known as "alcopops" — have become the fastest growing new alcohol product of all time in, according to UK researchers.

Sales grew by almost 300% in 1996, with further growth expected this year, said market analysts Mintel.

Young adults were most likely to drink these regularly or occasionally, with a significant percentage

claiming to do so, the company said.

The findings drew an immediate response from Labour's consumer affairs spokesman Nigel Griffiths, who said: "It gives the lie to what the industry has been telling me, that they have been targeted at the mature 30-plus market. 'I am sorry that the industry have ignored my warnings for 18 months that these products were specifically being marketed at teenage drinkers.'"

WORLD DIGEST

9 babies killed

NINE newborn infants in Brazil have died in the city of Campinas from a bacterial infection believed caused by contaminated saline solution in hospital drips.

The deaths occurred in six hospitals last week but were not publicly disclosed until yesterday, according to doctors. Campinas is 60 miles northwest of Sao Paulo.

Pile-up on M-way

UK POLICE were last night trying to discover what caused a 25-vehicle pile-up on a motorway in Berkshire at the start of the Easter weekend getaway.

A woman who died in the accident on the M4 was named by police as Amanda James, 28, from the Bristol area.

3 beheaded in Saudi

A SUDANESE convicted of murdering five people — was beheaded yesterday, in Saudi Arabia, the Interior Ministry said.

His execution was one of three. A Syrian and a Jordanian convicted of drug trafficking were also beheaded.

80 killed in clashes

CLASHES between armed cattle raiders and security forces have left 80 people dead in northern Kenya during the past week.

In the past, few were killed during clashes between raiders armed only with spears, and bows and arrows. But the availability of automatic weapons from war zones in neighbouring Sudan and Somalia has changed the nature of such conflicts.

World news extra and analysis are on Page 11