

Tokyo -

A recent television special said it all: it showed a building in downtown Tokyo pre-programmed office with lights that uniformly shut off at 10 p m; seconds later, virtually every light in the building came right back on.

Despite such displays, the nation that has taken the sting out of the words '**workaholic**', producing 10 percent of the world's exports with just 2 percent of its population, is suddenly obsessed with a deadly phenomenon known as **karoshi**. That is the Japanese word for '**death from overwork**'.

Tetsuinojo Uheta, the medical authority who coined the word, defines **karoshi** as a 'condition in which psychologically unsound work processes are allowed to continue in a way that disrupts the worker's normal work. It disrupts life rhythms, too, leading to a buildup of fatigue in the body and a chronic condition of overwork. All of that accompanied by a worsening of pre-existent high blood pressure and a hardening of the arteries and finally resulting in a fatal breakdown'.

Translation: all work and no play can really wreck one's health, even in Japan. Hardly a week goes by without a grim report about some overzealous worker in the prime of his life who could not just say no to **overtime**. Not long ago, 39-year-old police sergeant, Hartuo Okada, captured headlines as a **karoshi** victim by working double shifts for a month during the enthronement ceremonies for the nation's new monarch.

There are no reliable figures on the number of victims, but analysts believe that tens of thousands of Japanese become seriously ill or **die from overwork** each year. Despite promises by the government to trim working hours, the average Japanese clocked 2,150 hours in 1989, compared with 1,924 hours for Americans and 1,643 hours for the French. Some Japanese want to change.

When a group of lawyers and doctors set up the nation's first **karoshi** hot line in 1988, 135 people phoned in, on the first day. Since then, nearly 2,000 cases have been reported to the 42 hot lines across the nation, and an international call-in center has been set recently. To raise public awareness about the problem and to pressure the government and, corporate Japan into action, a group of lawyers, doctors and victims' wives has published a book called **Karoshi** : when the Corporate Warrior Dies, which recounts numerous horror stories.

Yet the government and most Japanese companies rarely acknowledges **karoshi** and provide no special compensation to survivors. As the Ministry of Labour defines it, overwork can only be considered a cause of death if the victim '**worked continuously for 24 hours preceding death**', or worked 16 hours a day for seven consecutive days leading up to death'. Alas, the recent media attention probably won't slow down the production lines much.

In a poll conducted by an insurance company, more than 40 percent of the employees the firm covered said they feared that overwork might kill them; few planned to do anything about it. All in all, it looks like another busy year for the folks at the **karoshi** hot line