

Man mentally competent at time of killings: judge

# KyoAni studio arsonist given death penalty

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Shinji Aoba was handed the death penalty on Thursday for setting a Kyoto Animation studio on fire in 2019 and killing 36 people, in one of Japan's deadliest mass murders.

The Kyoto District Court found the 45-year-old man guilty of setting the three-story building on fire because of a grudge he held against Kyoto Animation. He claimed the studio had stolen his ideas after it rejected his novels in an annual contest the company hosts. There is no evidence the company plagiarized any of his work.

Aoba also sustained heavy burns over most of his body in the attack.

On Thursday morning, 409 people lined up for a chance to secure one of the 23 seats available to listen to the court's ruling. Some members of the bereaved families were present as well.

The focus of the trial was on whether he was mentally competent enough to be held criminally liable.

Presiding Judge Keisuke Masuda said

Aoba was not mentally incompetent nor in a diminished state at the time of the crime, judging that he is criminally liable for what he did.

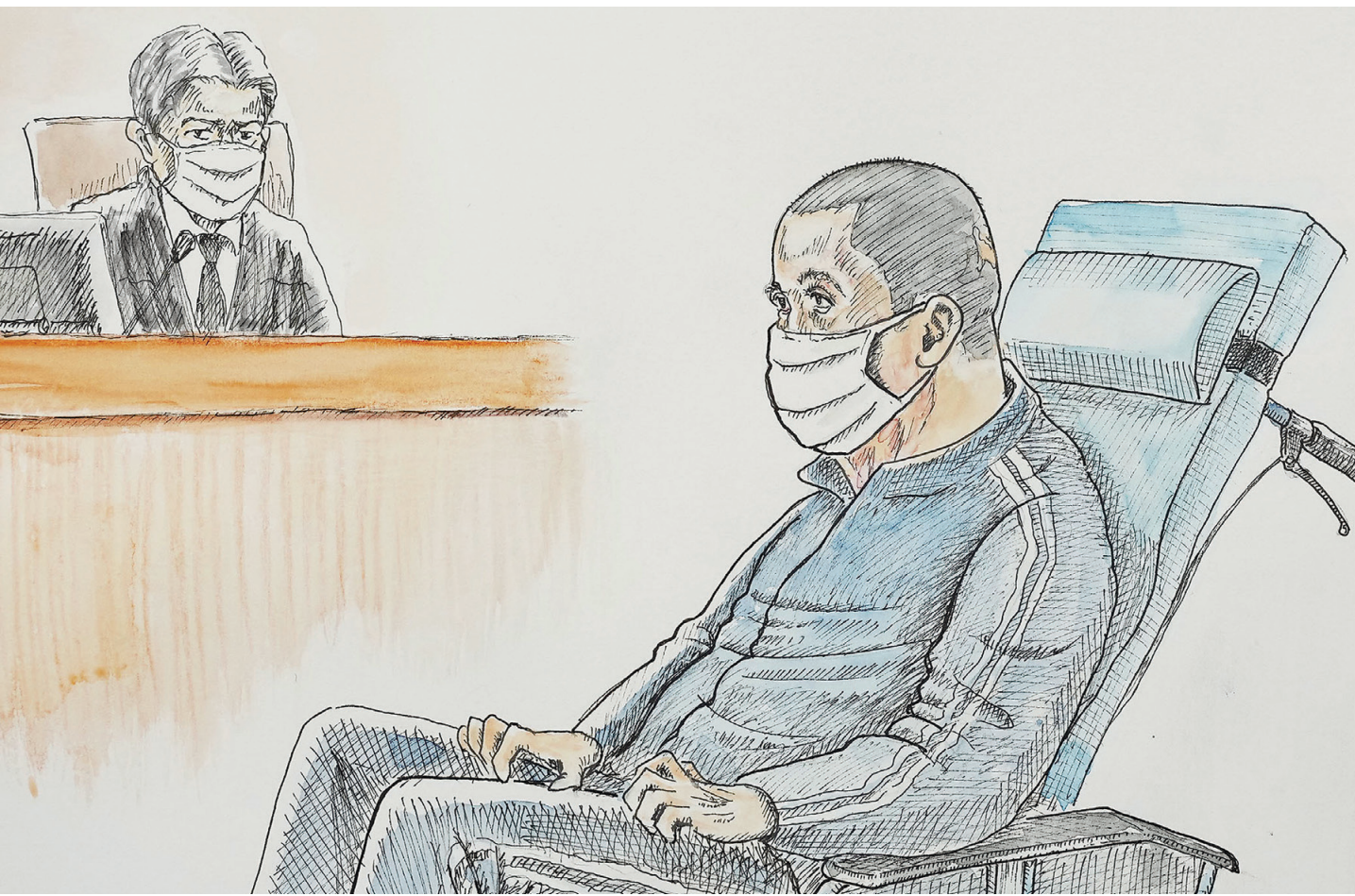
The ruling said that Aoba headed to Kyoto from his home in the city of Saitama and set the studio on fire to stop "No. 2," a figure from his delusions, from following him.

"But the impact of the delusions on the crime is not large," Masuda said. "The liability of taking the lives of 36 people is extremely grave, so there is no reason for the death penalty to be avoided."

Prosecutors had said he was competent enough and had argued that the death penalty was the only option given the gravity of Aoba's crime. The defense team, meanwhile, had argued that he should be acquitted or receive a reduced sentence due to his diminished mental capability.

Two psychiatrists who testified in court were also divided over his mental state.

On July 18, 2019, Aoba bought 40 liters of gasoline, after which he entered the Kyoto Animation studio, splashed gasoline on six workers while shouting "Go to hell!" and set



A courtroom sketch shows Shinji Aoba at the Kyoto District Court on Thursday. The court found Aoba guilty of setting a Kyoto Animation studio on fire and killing 36 people because of a grudge he had against the company. KYODO

the building on fire with a lighter. The fire engulfed the building, killing 36 people and leaving another 32 injured.

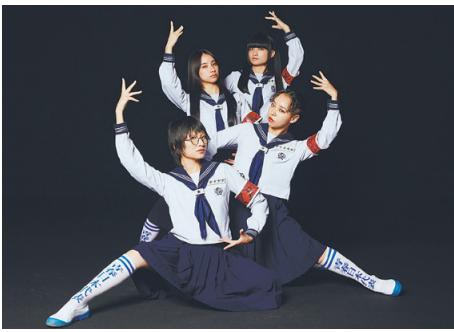
A survivor who had testified in court said she escaped from a window after she was splashed with gasoline. She sustained burns over 94% of her body and had to undergo surgery 49 times.

"I feel despair whenever I look in the mirror. It's grueling to live with this body," she said.

In a December session, he apologized to the victims and their families and said that



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## PM's new aid package aims to help quake recovery

ERIC JOHNSTON  
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Prime Minister Fumio Kishida's Cabinet compiled a financial aid package Thursday for the quake-stricken Noto Peninsula region in Ishikawa Prefecture.

The package is intended to support recovery efforts and aid the local economies of Ishikawa and the surrounding prefectures that were devastated after a 7.6 magnitude quake hit the region on New Year's Day.

More than three weeks have passed since the quake struck. And yet, more than 46,000 households in the affected areas still face a water outage while 15,000 people still remain in evacuation centers.

The support package will offer subsidies to small and medium-sized firms, including agricultural, fisheries, and small manufacturing firms, in Ishikawa Prefecture, as well as those in neighboring Niigata, Toyama, and Fukui prefectures. Ishikawa Prefecture was hit hardest by the quake.

The aid package includes a total of ¥1.5 billion (\$10.2 million) for Ishikawa businesses to rebuild their facilities, and another ¥300 million for those in Niigata, Toyama, and Fukui prefectures. On Friday, the Cabinet is expected to approve the use of ¥155.3 billion from the reserve fund of the current fiscal year's budget to pay for the whole plan.

In addition, the financial package will also beef up subsidies for leave allowance to help companies keep employees who are unable to work due to the impact of the quake. The rate that the government covers will be increased to four-fifths of the total for small and medium-sized firms, and two-thirds for larger companies.

Japan's labor laws obligate an employer to pay an employee leave compensation equivalent to at least 60% of the average daily wage over the previous three months during times when a business is forced to reduce its activities, as long as the employer agrees to retain the employee after the business returns to normal operation.

The Kishida government's package comes as calls grow to provide increased funding for individuals to rebuild their lives. The government is under pressure from the opposition Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan to double the current maximum of

## LDP's reform report appears light on firm actions targeting faction politics

### Analysis

GABRIELE NINIVAGGI  
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The Liberal Democratic Party's formal departure from decades of faction-based politics has raised questions about its real commitment to political reform and a break from old party politics.

The result of only two weeks of debate and hastily approved Thursday just before parliament convenes, the LDP's party reform interim report appears light on firm actions

and risks leaving unpleasant repercussions inside the party.

Despite all the high-sounding talk and the apparent commitment to a new beginning, experts agree it would likely take longer than two weeks of hurried debate to eradicate what's long been seen as a defining trait of the party.

At the center of the new report lies a reclassification of factions, with these downgraded to "policy groups" and formally deprived of their strong influence over government and party operations. Additionally, external scrutiny in their political-funds reports

and tougher rules on political funding were introduced.

"We will strip the factions of their role in matters of personnel and money and therefore dismantle the so-called factions," Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, who's also LDP president, said Tuesday as he addressed reporters at the party's headquarters in Tokyo.

However, as long as the party maintains its long-established practice of electing its leaders in party-wide elections every three years, there is no way it could get rid of factional influence on decisions over money and positions, said Koji Nakakita, a professor of politi-

c science at Chuo University.

"It looks like a very shallow solution to tackle declining popularity, one that doesn't reflect the actual state of things," said Nakakita, adding that the interim report doesn't contain any serious consideration of how the party should be changed, for instance, with regard to the over-institutionalization of factions.

"To elect a president you need a majority, and to obtain a majority you need groups. Once a group is formed, you need money for social engagements and ceremonial occasions, and those personal bonds are reflected

in personnel appointments when a president is chosen."

Strong factionalism has characterized the LDP since its early days in the 1950s. Over the decades, factions became increasingly institutionalized, acting almost as separate parties competing with one another for party and government posts.

Former Prime Minister Masayoshi Ohira's famous words that "When three people gather, two factions can be formed" — an evergreen phrase often used by the Japanese media when it comes to factions — speak of

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## JAXA confirms breakthrough moon landing

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Japan's lunar lander touched down 55 meters east of its target on the moon's surface on Saturday, despite losing one of its main engines during its final descent, the nation's space agency said Thursday.

The Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency's Smart Lander for Investigating Moon (SLIM) had aimed to land within 100 meters of a target site, much more precise than the several to tens-of-kilometers range seen in conventional lunar missions.

"We have confirmed that SLIM succeeded in making a soft landing within the accuracy of 100 meters at 12:20 a.m. (Saturday)," Hitoshi Kuninaka, director-general of JAXA's Institute of Space and Astronautical Science, told a news conference.

Officials also said that they would give themselves a "full score of 100 points" on the high-precision landing part of the mission, as SLIM would have likely landed within 10 meters — or perhaps even just 3 to 4 meters — away from the original target. Instead, it autonomously moved its



landing spot to avoid obstacles, using its "smart-eyes" technology.

Dubbed "Moon Sniper," SLIM started its final descent at 12:00 a.m. on Saturday. The final landing process is called the "20 minutes of terror" because of the possibility of a last-minute complication. Everything was going smoothly and as planned until the lander reached an altitude of 50 meters, at which point one of the two main engines was lost, most likely due to an "external factor," SLIM project manager

**An image of Japan's lunar lander and the moon's surface captured by SORA-Q, which was successfully released before the craft's touchdown on Saturday** JAXA / TOMY / SONY / DOSHISHA UNIVERSITY / VIA KYODO

Shinichiro Sakai said, without elaborating on what that might have been. An onboard camera captured a nozzle of the engine lying on the moon's surface, suggesting that the engine fell to the ground, he said.

The team is still analyzing what happened during the last 30 seconds of the craft's descent.

The trouble with the engine meant that SLIM swayed sideways as it approached the moon's surface and it actually landed upside down, officials said. As a result, solar cells on the lander could not generate power and the only power came from the onboard battery.

Prior to touching down, SLIM did manage to release two rovers — a tennis ball-sized device known as SORA-Q for capturing images on the surface, and a device to communicate with mission control and send images back to Earth, officials said.

The team intentionally switched off SLIM's battery at 2:57 a.m. to avoid using the power up and allow it to be switched back on later, the officials said.

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