

# Three decades since the Tokyo subway sarin attack: Lessons learned and ongoing challenges

Tomás A. E. Gabrielli\* 

Editor-in-Chief, National Poison Center (CNI) - 'Prof. Alejandro Posadas' National Hospital, El Palomar, Buenos Aires, Argentina.

\*[tomasgabrielli@panamericantoxicology.com](mailto:tomasgabrielli@panamericantoxicology.com)

Published: 30/06/2025 - DOI: <https://doi.org/10.62129/TWIA2882>

The sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway left an indelible mark on the history of Japan and the world. Thirty years later, the reverberations of this tragedy continue to be felt, both in the physical and psychological consequences that still affect the victims and society at large.

The attack was orchestrated by the apocalyptic cult *Aum Shinrikyo* ('Aum Supreme Truth'), which targeted the vicinity of the Metropolitan Police Department in Chiyoda. The sect was led by Shoko Asahara, born Chizuo Matsumoto in 1955 into a poor family. He suffered from congenital glaucoma, which led to his enrollment in a school for the blind, where he endured bullying. Initially, Asahara pursued studies in acupuncture and massage therapy, but over time, he became increasingly involved in Buddhism, New Age practices, yoga, and divination. After a brief period within the *Agonshu* sect and following two trips to India and Japan, he founded *Aum Shinsen No Kai* ('Society of Hermits of Aum Mountain') with the objective of restoring original Buddhism by renouncing materialism and establishing a monastic-type society.<sup>1</sup>

In 1987, the movement rebranded as *Aum Shinrikyo*, and by 1989, it had grown to approximately 4,000 followers and 390 clergy.<sup>2</sup> Many of the sect's members were highly educated, with backgrounds in fields such as medicine, engineering, and physics. They contributed significant financial resources to the group in exchange for perceived spiritual privileges and gifts.<sup>3</sup> To promote its ideology and attract followers, the movement employed various media, such as television, radio, and newspapers.

*Aum Shinrikyo* established its own program for the production of biological and chemical weapons, led by Hideo Murai and Masami Tsuchiya, who began manufacturing sarin in small quantities in 1993. Anticipating

a raid on their facilities and aiming to trigger the apocalypse prophesied by their leader, five members of the group punctured eight packages containing sarin using the tips of umbrellas.<sup>1,4</sup> The attack was carried out during Tokyo's rush hour (at 7:55 AM on a Monday), near the Kasumigaseki station (Fig. 1),<sup>5</sup> which is in close proximity to both government and police headquarters. At ground level, several vehicles were stationed to await the perpetrators, who had atropine on hand as an antidote to the nerve agent.

St. Luke's International Hospital, located approximately 3 km from the incident site, became the primary referral center for affected patients. The overwhelming number of victims, combined with the lack of established protocols for responding to chemical emergencies, severely strained the hospital's resources. This hindered the effective execution of decontamination procedures and the timely administration of atropine and 2-PAM, an oxime. Furthermore, medical personnel were subjected to secondary contamination. As a result, 13 individuals died, and over 6,000 people were affected, with some suffering long-term health consequences.<sup>6-8</sup>

When Asahara was captured, he was found with electrodes attached to his head, a method of suggestion used to 'transfer energy' between the leader and his followers. In 2000, *Aum Shinrikyo* formally acknowledged its responsibility for the attack and provided monetary compensation to the victims' families. The group later rebranded as *Aleph*, from which its leader, Joyu Fumihiko, eventually separated to form *Hikari no Wa* ('Ring of Light').<sup>3</sup> Finally, in 2018, Asahara and 13 other members of the sect were sentenced to death by hanging.<sup>9</sup>

The sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway is regarded as one of the most significant terrorist attacks of the 20th century. This event serves as a stark reminder of the dangers posed by unconventional arms



Figure 1. Kasumigaseki Station - Hibiya Line (Credits: Maruu).

and the vulnerabilities of modern societies. Thirty years later, chemical weapons remain a persistent threat, not only in the context of violent radicalization but also in ongoing armed conflicts, as demonstrated by the war in Syria.<sup>10</sup> In this context, the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), which was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2013, has played a pivotal role in advancing the goal of a world free from chemical weapons through the

Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC). This international treaty not only prohibits the development, production, stockpiling, transfer, and use of chemical weapons but also mandates the destruction of existing reserves within a defined timeframe. In an increasingly unstable geopolitical landscape, it is imperative for all nations to prioritize efforts to control weapons of mass destruction, regardless of political, economic, or religious differences.

## REFERENCES

- 1 Danzig R, Sageman M, Leighton T, Hough L, Yuki H, Kotani R, Hosford ZM. Aum Shinrikyo. Insights Into How Terrorists Develop Biological and Chemical Weapons. Washington DC: Center for a New American Security; 2011. 68 p. Available from: [https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/files.cnas.org/hero/documents/CNA\\_S\\_AumShinrikyo\\_Danzig\\_1.pdf](https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/files.cnas.org/hero/documents/CNA_S_AumShinrikyo_Danzig_1.pdf)
- 2 Reader I. Religious Violence in Contemporary Japan (NIAS Monographs). Honolulu: Routledge Curzon; 2000. 304 p
- 3 Melton JG. Encyclopedia Britannica [Internet]. [place unknown]; 2000. Aleph | History & Facts | Britannica; [cited 2025 Mar 5]. Available from: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Aleph>
- 4 Levy LA, Smithson A. Ataxia: The Chemical and Biological Terrorism Threat and the US Response. Washington DC: The Henry L. Stimson Center; 2000 [cited 2025 Mar 5]. Report No. 35. Available from: <https://www.stimson.org/2000/ataxia-chemical-and-biological-terrorism-threat-and-us-response/>
- 5 Maruu. Photo AC [Internet]. Kasumigaseki Station (Hibiya Line) [image]; [cited 2025 Mar 5]. Available from: [https://en.photo-c.com/photo/25253943/kasumigaseki-station—hibiya-line-?downloader\\_register=success](https://en.photo-c.com/photo/25253943/kasumigaseki-station—hibiya-line-?downloader_register=success)
- 6 Okumura T, Suzuki K, Fukuda A, Kohama A, Takasu N, Ishimatsu S, Hinohara S. The Tokyo Subway Sarin Attack: Disaster Management, Part 2: Hospital Response. Acad Emerg Med. 1998;5(6):618-24. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1553-2712.1998.tb02471.x>
- 7 Victims of 1995 Aum Tokyo Subway Sarin Gas Attack Near 6,300. Japan Today. 2010
- 8 Police Final Tally Confirms 6,583 Fell Victim to 8 Aum-related Crimes. Kyodo News Serv. 2010
- 9 Japón ejecuta al ideólogo del atentado con gas sarín en el metro de Tokio en 1995. El País. 2018
- 10 Gabrielli TA. Historia de los principales incidentes con armas químicas neurotóxicas. In: Mencías Rodríguez E, editor. Armas de guerra química: Neurotóxicos I. Madrid: Ediciones Díaz de Santos; 2023. p. 123-46