

TOKYO SUBWAY ATTACK

Situation: Aum Shinrikyo attacks Tokyo subway system with sarin gas.

At 7:39 a.m. on 20 March 1995, Masota Yokoyama boarded a train at Tokyo's Shinjuku subway station during the height of the morning commute to work. Taking a seat on the crowded train, Yokoyama placed two small plastic bags of Sarin – a nerve gas – wrapped in newspaper on the floor between his feet. Four stops later, as the train pulled into the Yotsuya station, Yokoyama stabbed the bags with the tip of a sharpened umbrella as he stood up, exited the train when the doors opened and left the scene by using a getaway car waiting for him outside the station. Within the span of only a few minutes, identical attacks also using sarin were conducted at four other Tokyo subway stations. The sarin attacks of 20 March 1995 ultimately claimed the lives of 12 people and injured more than 1,000.



Aum Shinrikyo, a group founded upon Buddhist doctrine but often referred to as a domestic cult, conducted the Tokyo sarin attacks. Aum Shinrikyo's reasons for conducting the attack are still under debate, but are most likely linked to trying to hasten the apocalypse or bringing down the Japanese government so they can install the head of their organization as Emperor of Japan.

Regardless of the reasons for the attack, the attacks on the Tokyo subway system shocked the Japanese authorities and citizens. The attacks represented the worst attack on Japanese soil since the end of World War II.

The attacks on the Tokyo subway system demonstrate the ability of terrorist groups to employ a wide array of tactics, including those using chemical and biological agents.



Morning commuters were completely unaware they had fallen victim to a terrorist attack until the Sarin, a tasteless, odorless and colorless gas began to affect people on the trains. At first, passengers began having difficulty breathing or their eyes began to water. On trains where higher concentrations of Sarin were released, passenger symptoms worsened to include collapsing and vomiting. Panic quickly set in on

the contaminated trains – some passengers fled the scene, one passenger kicked a package of Sarin onto the platform infecting people waiting to get on the train, some passengers heroically tried to pull collapsed passengers to safety.

While the exact timing and order of the Sarin gas releases are not known, Aum Shinrikyo successfully released Sarin gas on subway cars at five stations: Yojogi-uehara, Ochanomizu, Yotsuya, Ebisu and Akihabara. Due to the confusion of the event and the inability to immediately determine the cause of passenger illnesses, several trains were permitted to continue in operation after the Sarin was released. By the time the authorities took the contaminated trains out of service, 15 stations had been contaminated. Over 5,000 people were exposed to the Sarin gas and sought medical treatment. Over 1,000 passengers were listed as moderately ill to critical – 12 died.

You should be aware of your surroundings and if you notice people around you suddenly feeling sick or you experience symptoms, you should leave the area immediately and seek medical attention.

Once Aum Shinrikyo's involvement in the attack was determined, authorities quickly began making arrests. Of the ten members that executed the attacks, the five who carried and released the Sarin and the five that drove waiting getaway cars, seven were eventually arrested and convicted receiving either life in prison or death. Three of the ten are still in hiding and at least 13 other members of Aum Shinrikyo have been put on trial for the attacks.



Aum Shinrikyo holds the distinction of being the first terrorist group known to use chemical weapons. In an earlier attack, taking place in June 1994, Aum Shinrikyo released Sarin gas within the city of Matsumoto killing seven people. Unfortunately at the time, Japanese authorities focused their investigations on one of the innocent victims of the attack and did not connect the attack to Aum Shinrikyo. As a result, authorities were not expecting a similar attack to take place in other locations.

The attacks on the Tokyo subway system could have been much worse. Fortunately, in their hurry to leave the scene of the attack, the terrorists did not ensure that all bags of Sarin had been well punctured after stabbing them with their umbrellas. In fact, in the attack on the Yotsua station, the bag of Sarin was so poorly punctured that passengers were able to escape the train before any fatalities were incurred.

As terrorist organizations become more sophisticated and change tactics, attacks using chemical and biological agents could become more common and you should be on guard against them.