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Abstract

On the night of Sunday, October 31, 2021, a man was arrested for having stabbed a passenger and set fire on a commuter train in Tokyo, Japan. No relation has been confirmed between attacker and his victims. He later told the police he did not care who his targets were. He felt like ending his life, but at the same time he was afraid of doing so for himself. He thought he would receive death penalty and be forced to die as a result of conducting mass killing.

Somehow, the attacker surrendered to the police, seemingly without causing a full amount of devastation he had originally planned. Against his aspiration for conducting mass murder, the attack eventually ended with no fatality.

The items he used as weapons were easily available to anyone at retail stores. The cost for acquiring them can be covered with no more than a couple of hundreds of dollars at most. Even so, his attack left widespread and lasting fear among the public. Especially, considering the location of the attack, a commuter train, anybody felt proximity to the threat.

The unrest the attacker ignited might be even disproportionately enormous given simplicity in preparation, primitiveness in method, and incompleteness in attack. One might feel it was more vulnerabilities in the society than his immature tactics that favored the attacker in magnifying horror. Even so, an eye-catching case like this, although it does not include elements of assertion, can have an appealing effect to inspire others.

Keywords: Assault; Mass Casualty; Copycat

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Assault

On the night of Sunday, October 31, 2021, a man was arrested for having stabbed a passenger and set fire on a commuter train in Tokyo, Japan. It was at the time when the country was getting away from its so-called fifth wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. The attack occurred on a special express train of Keio Line, which connects Tokyo downtown, Shinjuku, to its western outskirts, Hachioji City, in 44 minutes. It was shortly after the train, which was heading from Hachioji for Shinjuku, left Chofu Station, almost a halfway point between the two, at 7:54 p.m. for a 10-minute journey to the next Meidaimae Station passing 11 stations in between.

Roughly 30 passengers were on each of the 10 coaches.

At Chofu Station, Kyota Hattori, a man aged 24, carrying a black knapsack, got on the seventh coach from the front. According to witnesses, he wore an outfit like “Joker,” a famous villain in the Hollywood movie, with his hair dyed blond and his mouth covered with a black mask. After getting on the train, he walked straight to priority seats at the end of the long-seat coach, and put down his knapsack on one of the seats. From it, he took out a hunting knife with its blade 30 centimeters long and an insecticide spray can. Soon, a male passenger aged 72, sitting on a seat on the opposite side, felt alarmed by such stuff which was unlikely to have any use for passengers on commuter trains, and questioned him on what he was doing with them. Then, Hattori, without saying a word, walked to the man, suddenly sprayed insecticide on his face, and stabbed him on the right side of his chest.

After stabbing the man, Hattori started to walk slowly toward the front. According to witnesses, he was silent while held a knife tainted with blood, and “sometimes slowly swung it as if he showed it off.”¹ Panic quickly spread throughout the train, as passengers who realized something extraordinary had happened started to flee but soon knew they had almost nowhere to escape. They scrambled to the same directions, either to the front or rear, inevitably stuck in crowds at joints between coaches, and then started to hustle each other, screaming with horror. Some passengers, who thought it was too late to run, chose to remain where they were and tried to let the attacker walk by, careful not to see eye to eye with him. Since it was in the midst of Halloween festivities, some who glanced at Hattori, a young man in an erratic outfit, supposed it was some kind of prank, but they quickly realized he was not joking, sensing something abnormal in the atmosphere around him.

“At 7:56 p.m.,” two minutes after the train left Chofu Station and a moment after Hattori stabbed a man, some passengers pushed buttons to activate an emergency intercom.² The device is attached to each coach for passengers in need of help to communicate with a train conductor. However, according to the conductor on the train, no reaction came through the intercom though he responded to the call. Even so, he started a procedure required in such a case assuming something wrong had happened on his train. On the other hand, Hattori continued to walk toward the front, a move that pushed fleeing passengers ahead of him further to the same direction. Hattori finally stopped at the fifth coach from the front and pulled out a plastic bottle filled with lighter fluid from his knapsack. He opened it and spread its content on seats and floor, while he also made a motion of splashing the fluid to fleeing passengers. He then set fire with a Zippo lighter. The flame quickly reached the ceiling and filled the coach with thick smoke, but fortunately none of passengers caught fire.

After setting fire, Hattori turned around and took the way back, walking towards the rear. When he reached the eighth coach from the front, he sat down on a seat and began to smoke a cigarette. Around the same time, some of the fleeing passengers who reached the first coach started to bang the partition with the driver’s room to notify him of the incident. However,

1 “Man started assault on another male passenger shortly after getting on train. Holding knife, man kept silent throughout attack. Passengers panicked,” The Yomiuri Shimbun Online, November 1, 2021

2 The Yomiuri Shimbun Online, November 8, 2021

almost by this moment, the driver, likely to have been informed by the conductor, had already been aware of a trouble and started to take steps to make an emergency stop. Following the railway company's regulations to ensure safe escape of passengers, he tried to stop his train not somewhere between stations but at the nearest Kokuryo Station, a local stop, which his train was almost reaching at that moment.

However, "at 7:57 p.m.," seconds before the train stopped at a right position along the platform, passengers, who seemed to have been panicked to see a flame on the fifth coach and assumed the driver had not realized the incident yet, pulled emergency brake levers attached to each coach.³ The brake instantly halted the still creeping train "at 7:58 p.m.," and this caused another problem.⁴ The platform the train came into was attached with screen shield and doors, and since the train stopped two or three meters behind where it was supposed to, the train doors and screen doors remained unaligned, leaving gaps between them. Because of these gaps, the conductor was hesitant to open the doors out of concern for passengers' safety. Besides, what made the situation more complicated was, once an emergency brake was activated, the driver could not restart his train unless he deactivated the brake, which then required due steps.



Passengers fleeing from Keio Line train, October 31 (From Asahi News Digital)

Eventually, "at 7:59 p.m.," passengers, who were desperate to escape, started to wriggle out of windows which could be opened only half of their size for safety reasons, stepped on the edge of the screen shield or (screen) doors roughly at a height of men's chest, and jumped

3 One week after Keio Line Attack: Intention of murder and element of planning come to light. Issue of evacuation arises. / The Sankei News / November 7, 2021

4 Ibid.

on the platform.⁵ Thus, by “8:08 p.m.,” all passengers except the stabbed man were out of the train.⁶ Hattori, who was sitting on a seat of the eighth coach, with a cigarette on one hand and a knife on the other, appeared to show no sign of taking further actions. When police officers came into the train, he reportedly dropped the knife on his own will, and “at 8:09 p.m.,” he surrendered.⁷

In the meantime, the fire on the fifth coach was extinguished less than 30 minutes after it was set, burning seats and part of the floor. The stabbed passenger, who was in a critical condition when taken to a hospital, remained in a coma for several days but eventually recovered. In addition, 16 others suffered minor injuries on their throats or eyes by being exposed to smoke. Images of Hattori, shortly before his arrest, sitting alone on a deserted coach and smoking a cigarette in a daring manner with his flu mask lowered to his jaw as well as images of passengers desperately fleeing were taken by passengers with their smartphones. Such images were repeatedly aired on TV or massively circulated on the internet, which amplified shock and horror among the public. No relation has been confirmed between Hattori and the passengers including the stabbed man. In fact, he told the police he had not cared who his targets were. According to the police, he showed no remorse and even said, “It was a pity I could not kill so many people as I had planned.”⁸

Motive & Planning

Kyota Hattori grew up in Fukuoka Prefecture, western Japan. Some media reports quote Hattori’s friends in his childhood as saying he was a quiet boy and at least not a short-tempered type. After graduating from high school, he was engaged in part-time jobs such as caregiver for the old or staff member at internet cafes.



Kyota Hattori during attack, October 31 (From ANN News)

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ “Man started assault on another male passenger shortly after getting on train. Holding knife, man kept silent throughout attack. Passengers panicked,” The Yomiuri Shimbun Online, November 1, 2021

⁸ “Assault and arson case on Keio Line train: Suspect says, ‘I used lighter fluid. I targeted express train, having Odakyu Line attack in my mind.’” The Yomiuri Shimbun Online, November 1, 2021

“‘I yearn for joker. I regret not having achieved murder,’ Hattori told police. He walked around Shibuya before attack. What lies behind targeting special express train?” FNN Prime Time Online, November 1, 2021

Some of his friends met Hattori four years before the attack at a reunion of a coming-of-age ceremony. According to them, nothing extraordinary could be found in him, at least from their conversations. He mentioned nothing about Joker or the movie and it seemed he preferred to listen to his friends rather than take the lead in conversations. These friends say they are appalled to see Hattori on TV because he looks totally different from what he was at the time of the reunion, especially as for his dyed hair.

The last job Hattori had was a telephone operator at a company dealing in mobile phones, but he quit it in June 2021 after he had a quarrel with a customer and was transferred. Hattori told the police he had come to feel depressed since then, deploring he failed both in his jobs and relations with his friends. He felt like ending his life, but at the same time he was afraid of doing so for himself. According to Hattori, that was the moment when he started to think about conducting mass killing, expecting he would receive death penalty and be forced to die as a result.

According to media reports, Hattori lived with his mother and younger sister in Fukuoka, but in late July, he left his home town after telling them he wanted to be alone and travel somewhere for a change. He then entered into a life of staying at one hotel after another in major cities like Kobe and Nagoya. In August, He watched Joker, a thriller film, on his smartphone and was impressed by its main character who mercilessly committed murders without remorse. According to his account, he came to adore Joker as a charismatic figure, and felt more and more aspiration to commit mass killing.

At first, Hattori considered targeting pedestrians during Halloween festivities in Shibuya, a busy district in downtown Tokyo. However, in August, an indiscriminate assault case occurred on a train of Odakyu Odawara Line, a railway connecting Tokyo's western suburbs and Shinjuku, and the case led him to turn his eyes on trains for his target. He was allegedly fascinated by the case and came to even think it was what he wanted to do. The assault happened on the evening of August 6, and a man aged 36, suddenly started to slash other passengers with a butcher knife on a rapid express train during its eight-minute journey. He then spread salad oil and, according to his account, tried to "set fire," in which he inevitably failed. The man was eventually arrested while his attack left 10 passengers heavily or slightly injured.

After studying the case, Hattori was convinced that in confined places like running trains he could conduct his attack more effectively than outdoors. On the other hand, he imagined people would flee in all directions once he started to slash someone in a busy square in Shibuya. Moreover, he thought the longer the journey between stations was, the more damage he could inflict, an idea that later made him choose a special express train. Hattori also set the date of his attack on October 31, a day during the Halloween festivities, since he assumed trains were more crowded than usual by fun seekers.

In late September, Hattori moved to Hachioji City and settled in a budget hotel, from which he visited tourist destinations in downtown Tokyo, becoming a frequent passenger of Keio Line. While preparing for his attack, he kept contact with his family until the eve of the attack. Sometime in late September, Hattori's younger sister exchanged messages with him through Line app, to ask about his schedule on his coming birthday in November, and according to her,

she couldn't sense any abnormal sign in her brother's reaction.

Preparation

So far, Hattori is regarded as a lone offender. No information has emerged that indicates he received support of any kind throughout the process from the planning to the attack. He has no record of committing an assault crime before this case, and no information suggests he has specialized skills on sabotage or has received trainings on such skills.

The items he used as weapons were easily available to anyone at retail stores and buying them requires almost no clearance such as checking buyers' identifications. The cost for acquiring them can be covered with no more than a couple of hundreds of dollars at most while a location of the attack, a commuter train, imposes almost no restrictions on access. According to media reports, Hattori practiced how to effectively spread lighter fluid in a bathroom of his hotel room. However, that was likely to be all he did for what appeared to be a "rehearsal" to realize higher lethality in his attack. All the items such as Zippo lighters, lighter fluid and insecticide spray cans were used in almost their original forms, which suggests he didn't make serious attempts to weaponize them.

Of all the items, it was a hunting knife that Hattori acquired first. He bought it by mail order on the internet in June, which was soon after he quit his job of a telephone operator and around the time he started to have a desire for mass killing. He reportedly doesn't imply any difficulty in the process of its purchase. In Japan, a hunting knife like the one he used is legally regarded as a daily tool in much the same way as items like kitchen knives, box cutters or scissors. Basically, to purchase or own such tools is not restricted and requires no legal clearance, while to carry them in public spaces without any good cause can be regarded as illegal. Only oversight for purchase, if it exists, may fall on each retailer's self-imposed rules, although even such oversight is improbable for those who make purchase on the internet.

However, after hearing about the assault on Odakyu Line, Hattori allegedly came to consider flame as his main weapon of choice instead of a knife out of his thought that burning people to death seemed physically easier than slashing people with a knife. Eventually, Hattori allegedly laid out steps like the following for his attack.

- Use a knife or insecticide spray to frighten passengers and thus block their resistance
- Spread flammable liquid on passengers
- Set fire and, if necessary, use an insecticide spray to fan fire

As for flammable liquid, Hattori, although he did not have a driver's license much less a car, initially considered using gasoline for his attack. Indeed, he still had an option of buying gasoline in portable tanks at gas stations, and such purchases, which previously required almost no clearance, are relatively common practice specifically in countryside as people buy gasoline for grass mowers. However, one arson case, which happened about two years before

Hattori planned his attack, changed the regulations.

The arson occurred in Kyoto Prefecture in July 2019, central Japan and a man set fire on a building of an animation production company. He allegedly came to have a unilateral grudge against the company over a novel writing contest it held. In the contest, winners' stories were to be used for cartoons the company would produce. According to the man, he submitted his work to the contest, but even though his novel was eliminated in the selection, he thought his story was used by the company without his consent. Indeed, a novel by the man's name was reportedly submitted to the contest, but the company denied it had used his work. Anyway, in the arson, the man spread gasoline he had bought in a portable tank at a gas station and set fire, which killed 35 company employees and injured 36 others in the building. The man, who was arrested at the site, also got critically injured by the flame he ignited but later recovered.

Following the attack, stricter regulations on sales of gasoline were introduced and came into effect on February 1, 2020. Since then, retailers, mostly, gas station staff, have to check and record customers' identifications as well as purposes of their purchases when they come to buy gasoline in portable tanks. According to Hattori, he also learned about the new regulations and eventually gave up to buy gasoline out of fear that such process in purchase was likely to cause suspicion on him.

Ultimately, Hattori chose lighter fluid for his attack. Lighter fluid, generally sold in either 133 ml or 355 ml cans for end users, is available at retailer shops such as convenience stores or DIY stores, and purchase of lighter fluid at such retailer shops basically does not require any scrutiny. Even so, out of vigilance, Hattori allegedly visited a shop which specialized in Zippo lighters along with related items in a busy shopping district of Ueno, downtown Tokyo, assuming he was less likely to draw attention at such a shop than convenience stores. However, despite Hattori's vigilance, the shop's cashier who is thought to have served him told the police and the mass media that he remembered a young man, likely Hattori, had bought 10 cans of lighter fluid two weeks before the attack. What the cashier simply felt at the moment was "the man's way of purchase looked strange for an end user," but he didn't go so far as to have suspicion on the customer, "seemingly, a ubiquitous adolescent with no sign of abnormality."⁹

After the attack, the police found 20 lighter fluid cans, most of which were empty, in his hotel room. Hattori allegedly acquired 3.5L to 4L of lighter fluid in total, put it into five empty plastic beverage bottles, and brought them to the attack. However, he splashed only one of them in the attack and still had roughly 2L in the remaining four bottles when arrested. To set fire, Hattori used Zippo lighters, which, according to him, would keep lighting fires even after taking off his hands from them. He brought five such lighters for the attack. With aims of frightening passengers and, if necessary, fanning fire, he brought five insecticide spray cans.

As for his outfit, a Joker-like costume, Hattori told the police he had arranged it "in much the same way as people wore their most favorite clothes for their important occasions."¹⁰ He bought it for 200 thousand yen after searching around at department stores in Shinjuku in

9 "Keio Line Attack: Meticulously prepared? What did he have in knapsack?" Japan TV news 24, November 3, 2021

10 Ibid.

mid-October. Moreover, Hattori dyed his hair blond six days before the attack, likewise, bearing Joker in mind.

On the evening of October 31, a day of the attack, Hattori, wearing his Joker-like costume, walked around busy squares and streets in Shibuya “only to have a look,”¹¹ according to his account, before getting on a Keio Line train at Shibuya Station. Moments after getting on a train bound for the outskirt, Hachioji, he changed his mind and decided to choose a train heading for the downtown, Shinjuku, for his attack, since trains for the downtown, it seemed to him, carried more passengers than trains for the outskirt at that time. Therefore, he got off at Chofu Station and got on an incoming special express train bound for Shinjuku.

Against his aspiration for conducting mass murder, the attack eventually ended with no fatality. As for his plot of burning people to death, the actual situation did not proceed as Hattori planned. Once he set fire, it appeared, he somehow did not take more actions to maximize damage though he still had remaining lighter fluid. Rather, it looked as if he had lost his will to continue his attack after that moment. Without making such moves to prolong his attack like taking hostages or barricading himself, he surrendered to the police in 15 minutes after inception. Given these facts along with his comment, “I could not kill so many passengers as I had planned,” his assault seemed to have ended before causing a full amount of its devastation.¹²

Funding

By the time Hattori moved from planning into preparation of the attack around late September, he is assumed to have run out of his savings, and since then, consumer finance seems to have been his only financial source up to the day of the attack. The total amount he borrowed was reportedly hundreds of thousands of yen (a few thousand dollars) and he allegedly was not worried about pay-off, given what he was going to do.

Consumer finance, a financial product which targets individuals for their personal consumption, features quick assessment for contracts, no requirement of mortgage, and flexibility in pay-off. Their interest rates range from 14% to 18% per year. The amount of loan is from ten thousand yen (roughly 70 dollars) at minimum to 8 million yen (roughly 5,500 dollars) at maximum, while the amount of loan in each contract is limited within one-third worth of borrowers' yearly income by the regulation of the Money Lending Business Act. Having a regular and stable income is one of a few requirements to be regarded as eligible for loan. Once you sign a contract, you can borrow the amount up to the limit designated on you at any applicable ATM as if you withdrew cash from your savings. Basically, consumer finance enables you to make loan unnoticed by those around you such as family, friends, or employers, and by fully processing online, you don't need to even meet finance company's staff face to face. Technically, some finance companies also provide service to non-Japanese who have permanent resident

11 “One week after Keio Line Attack; Intention of murder and element of planning come to light. Issue of evacuation arises.” The Sankei News, November 7, 2021

12 “Keio Line attack: Failed in jobs and relations with friends. Plot mass killing for Halloween festivities?” The Sankei News, November 1, 2021

statuses in Japan on condition they meet other requirements imposed on Japanese such as stable and regular income.

Those who signed contracts are obliged to update the finance companies of their latest statuses on matters like income and address. However, as finance companies don't necessarily keep trucking their customers' statuses on a daily basis, changes can be left unnoticed if customers don't make reports voluntarily. Therefore, technically, it is probable customers extract cash from ATMs even after having lost regular income by using a contract they previously made. Though details on how Hattori, a jobless man from a certain point, could have access to cash during his journey are unclear, it is likely he misused his loan contract.

After Effects

The attack took place on a commuter train, a vital infrastructure and integral part of daily life for the general public. Naturally, people felt proximity to the threat. Moreover, the sheer nature of the site, a confined space with no way to escape, magnified fear. People witnessed devices and regulations which were supposed to protect passengers took the other side. Having past cases in mind, people were preoccupied with fears of possible copycats. They were aware that eye-catching crimes such as indiscriminate assaults were likely to be followed by similar cases. Indeed, after the attack on Odakyu Line in August, the authorities issued a request to domestic railway companies in September to raise their alarm against suspicious persons or objects, but Hattori's attack forced the government to make a similar request again in November. After all, his attack ended in 15 minutes, but the fear he generated lasted for at least several days, as is reflected in incidents like the following.

Oimachi Line

On November 4, four days after the Keio Line attack, an uproar occurred at Tokyu Oimachi Line, a commuter line connecting downtown Tokyo and its western outskirt, Kanagawa Prefecture. At around 5:20 p.m., a man suddenly started to bang his bag against the floor and doors on a train which happened to be stopping at Futakotamagawa Station in the southwestern part of downtown Tokyo. Passengers around him, many of whom were still mindful of Hattori's attack, hurriedly tried to get away from the man by shoving each other, and some of them fell into panic. Due to the uproar, trains on the line halted for about 5 minutes before resumed. However, no arrest was made and no casualties were reported.

Tozai Line

On November 6, a man in his 50s was arrested for having threatened other passengers with a sharp-pointed object on Tozai Line, a commuter line running through downtown Tokyo. The incident occurred at 8:45 a.m. on a train reaching Monzen Nakacho Station. It was at the time wearing a mask at public places, especially in indoor spaces like trains, was generally seen as a common practice. However, unlike other passengers, the man was not wearing a mask and felt he was teased by a couple sitting close to him for not wearing one. Enraged by the couple, he

pulled out a sharp-pointed object from his bag, something that looked like an awl by witnesses' account, and started to show it off before the couple's faces. The man later told the police he had done so only to frighten the couple. However, his move seemed to be enough to drive not only the couple but also other passengers around them to flee for safety, and horror quickly spread throughout the train. As there was no way for escape on the running train, passengers fell into panic. Ultimately, the man was arrested shortly after getting off the train at Monzen Nakacho Station. While nobody was reportedly injured, at least seriously, Tozai Line halted its trains for a moment due to the incident.

Keihin Tohoku Line

From the midnight on November 6 to the early dawn on 7, Keihin-Tohoku Line, a commuter line connecting Tokyo and its neighboring prefectures, stopped its trains in response to a call made by a passenger who allegedly saw someone have a knife at Minami Urawa Station, a station to the north of Tokyo. Search operation was conducted at the station by railway staff and the police, but no suspicious person was found. Eventually, Keihin-Tohoku Line restarted its trains after a halt of half an hour.

Kyushu Shinkansen

On November 8, a man aged 69 was arrested for setting fire on a bullet train of Kyushu Shinkansen in southwestern Japan. The incident occurred at 8:45 a.m., shortly after the eight-coach train departed Kumamoto Station at 8:37 a.m. for an 11-minute journey to the next Shin Yatsushiro Station. The man on the third coach from the front suddenly poured lighter fluid on the floor, set fire to a sheet of paper with a disposable lighter, and dropped it on the liquid. At the time, about 30 passengers were on the 80-seat coach. Fortunately, the fire burned only a part of the floor and a seat before it was quickly extinguished by passengers who had realized the man's suspicious behavior. According to witnesses, the man didn't take more actions even after the fire he set was extinguished, and seemed to be listening to a passenger who was trying to dissuade him.

As soon as he set fire, the train stopped as passengers pushed emergency buttons. However, the train eventually resumed its journey to the nearest Yatsushiro Station instead of evacuating passengers somewhere between stations, because the situation seemed to be under control by the time a train conductor got to the site. None of the 141 passengers were injured, and they remained relatively calm even after an instruction to stay away from the third coach was announced. When police officers rushed into the train at Yatsushiro Station, the man sat still on a seat without showing any sign of resistance. The police found he kept lighter fluid in a 300ml plastic bottle but except that, no other stuff which was likely to be used as a weapon was seized from him. The man told the police he had felt like doing the same thing when he heard the news about the Keio Line attack.¹³ He also said he had intended to commit a suicide.

¹³ "Man attempted arson? 'I imitated the Keio Line attack,' says arrested man." NHK, November 8, 2021

Toei Asakusa Line

On the night of November 11, someone made an emergency call to warn that smoke was coming from somewhere on a train of Asakusa Line, a commuter line which runs downtown Tokyo. According to the call, a strange smell was also sensed. In response to the call, firefighters and railway staff checked the train which was stopping at Daimon Station, while some of the passengers were evacuated from it. Eventually, nothing suspicious was found and none were injured.

Conclusion

Despite simplicity in preparation, primitiveness in method, and incompleteness in attack, the case left widespread and lasting fear among the public. The unrest caused by the attack might be even disproportionately enormous given the effort the offender made. However, by reviewing the case, one might feel it was more vulnerabilities in the society than his immature tactics that favored the offender in magnifying horror. Even so, an eye-catching case like this, although it does not include elements of assertion, can have an appealing effect to inspire others. On the other hand, it should be noted in this case the newly-introduced regulation on gasoline, a step taken out of a lesson learnt from the previous tragedy, seems to have worked, at least, on preventing a far worse scenario.