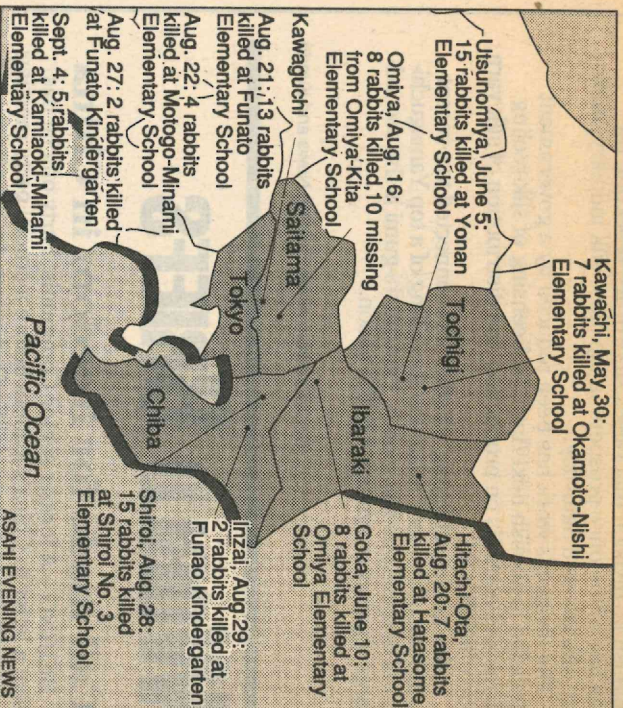




Butchered pets strike fear in Kanto region

BY TARO KARASAKI
Asahi Evening News

School principal Shigeru Hagiwara said he wanted to teach students about morality and responsibility when he let a second-grade class keep pet rabbits at Motoogo Minami Elementary School in Kawaguchi, Saitama Prefecture.

Ironically, the lesson turned into horror last month when dogs killed four of the children's five rabbits in a pen that apparently had been pried open by the owner of the dogs.

It was one in a recent string of attacks on school pets that has fueled fears in the Kanto area. Many have taken these attacks as a warning signs that their children could be the next targets.

On the morning of Aug. 22, the school's custodian in Kawaguchi woke up to the sound of barking dogs. When he entered the schoolyard, he saw two large black dogs growling outside the rabbit cage. Two other dogs were inside the pen. The custodian managed to scare off the animals.

The dead rabbits were bitten in the neck.

"It appears as if someone had pried open the fence," said Hagiwara, looking at the snarled wire of the empty cage.

"The children are clearly shocked," he said last week, just after delivering a speech to schoolchildren returning from summer vacation. He said the 89 students were "eerily

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quiet" when he explained what had happened to the rabbits.

Since April, at least 86 rabbits and seven chickens kept at 11 schools in Ibaraki, Tochigi, Chiba and Saitama prefectures have been killed. Others were dismembered or disemboweled.

Although the attacks have not been directly linked, they are similar in their sadism, police said.

"It appears that we are dealing with one or more people who are killing animals for fun," said a senior police officer at the Kawaguchi Police Station.

Now, educators and residents in Kawaguchi fear that whoever is behind the attacks will start targeting children.

Hagiwara said parents have rabbits had been killed, apparently discovered that five of their six elementary school near Motoogo Minami, Saitama Prefecture, on Thursday morning, officials at Kamiacki Minami Elementary School said.

On Thursday morning, officials at Kamiacki Minami Elementary School said the fence was pried open.

"We are investigating the case from the angle that a person or several persons are involved," said an official with the prefecture.

"We had just reinforced the fences around the pen after hearing about the other killings," said Isamu Minami, 51, principal at Kamiacki Minami. "But we never dreamed that our school would be targeted."

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Residents fearful after spate of brutal attacks on pets at schools

The Saitama prefectural police, which is investigating four cases in the prefecture.

The officer, who declined to be named, said that while destroying animals is considered a case of damage to property, the brutal nature of the attacks underscores the seriousness of these cases.

"The manner in which the rabbits have been killed is most devious. It bears some resemblance to bullying," the officer said.

The attacks, believed to be acts of vengeance toward schools, have prompted some communities to order pupils to show up at school in groups.

Licca Kayama, 37, a psychiatrist at a hospital in Saitama Prefecture, said the rabbit slayings are symbolic of the nature of crimes today.

"There is no clear target for the direct aggression" of the instigator, Kayama said.