

Fear, suspicion silence Kobe's Suma community

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KOBE—The horrific murder of a primary schoolboy last month has struck fear into the lives of people living in the once peaceful residential area of Suma Ward, Kobe.

Streets where children once played are all but deserted, save for police officers and reporters.

Located only five minutes away by subway from the busy and overcrowded industrial and commercial district along the Seto Inland Sea coast, the area's tranquility is ensured by the mountain range that separates it from the more vibrant coastal areas. But the tranquility has been replaced by an eerie silence.

On morning of May 27, the severed head of 11-year-old Jun Hase was found in front of the gate of a local middle school. The boy's body was found at the top of a nearby hill in the Kita-Suma Danchi housing complex later the same day.

If it was possible, for a moment, to forget the bizarre events of recent days, the area would be a pleasant place to live, with ample greenery provided by trees lining streets and separating housing complexes located in the hills. After the murder, those same trees were trimmed so that local residents and police were given a better view of their immediate surroundings. Even so, very few people dare to go out these days.

On a cloudy Wednesday afternoon, the parks were deserted. Small groups of mothers hurried to nearby primary schools to collect their children. Many of them were approached for comment by reporters, but only a few stopped to talk.

At Tainohata Primary School, where Jun Hase had been a sixth-year pupil, groups of students began leaving the school at about 2:30 p.m. escorted by mothers and police offi-

Police: Kobe killer possibly left-handed

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KOBE—Jun Hase, who was decapitated late last month, and two schoolgirls stabbed in March—one fatally—all may have been victims of a left-handed attacker, further deepening suspicions that all three were victims of the same assailant, police said Thursday.

Police said a close examination of the girls' wounds suggested that their attacker was left-handed. Similarly, police said a note left with Hase's remains was written with a ruler, perhaps to disguise the fact that the author was left-handed.

Handwriting analysis of Japanese characters can usually reveal if the author is left- or right-handed.

Police also said Wednesday that two new witnesses claimed to have

seen a suspicious man, estimated to be about 170 centimeters tall, on two separate occasions on May 23 and 27.

One witness, 34, told police he was driving when he saw a parked black sedan at about 5:15 a.m. on May 23, one day before the boy disappeared. He told police that the man, who appeared to be in his 30s, was walking along a driveway in front of Tomogaoka Middle School, where Hase's head was discovered on May 27.

Police suspect that the man, carrying a backpack and clad in jeans, might have been inspecting the spot in advance since the car resembled the Nissan Bluebird seen in the area on May 27, the day Hase's remains were discovered.

cers. A 70-year-old retired man passed by, looking for his wife, whom he said had not returned home at the expected time from her trip to the local church.

"I walked all the way down here for half an hour, but I saw no one on the street. The town is so silent," he said. "Perhaps someone offered my wife a ride home. At any rate, we are forced to do something we do not have to do normally, just like these mothers."

Bus stops and supermarkets were among the few places where people could be seen going about their daily business. A 55-year-old housewife waiting for a bus near the primary school said she usually walks 15 minutes to the nearest subway station. "But after the incident my family insisted I take a bus," she

explained.

A 53-year-old man who has lived in the ward for 30 years said, "Suma used to be a quiet, peaceful place." After his house was destroyed in the Great Hanshin Earthquake of 1995, he lived in a temporary housing complex in the Kita-Suma area until April.

"Why do all these terrible things have to happen here, one after the other?" the man asked, referring to the quake, the E. coli O-157 food poisoning outbreak last year, the murder of a schoolgirl in March and the recent murder.

The fact that the murderer remains at large has apparently prompted people to be on the alert in all their daily contacts with strangers. A rental video shop owner in the housing complex declined to comment when asked