

Four killers sent to the gallows

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Four convicted murderers were hanged Thursday, the first executions this year and maintaining the fast pace that saw 15 people put to death in 2008, an unusually high number for one year.

It was the second set of execution orders signed by Justice Minister Eisuke Mori, who sent two inmates to the gallows Oct. 28. He assumed the post Sept. 24. "I just conducted my duty as the justice minister," Mori said at a news conference.

Executions have been on the rise in recent years. Mori's immediate predecessor, Okiharu Yasuoka, signed off on three executions in September even though he held the office for only about a month. The man he replaced, Kunio Hatoyama, ordered 13 executions during his 12-month stint that started in August 2007, the most hangings by a single justice minister since at least 1993.

Mori disclosed the names of the prisoners, a practice started by Hatoyama.

Tadashi Makino, 58, was convicted of robbing and killing a woman and assaulting and robbing four other women in Kitakyushu in March 1990 while he was on parole. His previous sentence was life in prison for robbery and murder.

He was executed at the Fukuoka Detention Center. The sentence was finalized 15 years and two months ago.

Yukinari Kawamura, 44, and Tetsuya Sato, 39, were convicted of conspiring with four others to burn two women to death after taking their cash and other

valuables, and injuring and robbing a man in Aichi Prefecture in April 2000.

They were executed at the Nagoya Detention Center. Their sentences were finalized 2 1/2 years ago.

Shojiro Nishimoto, 32, was convicted of robbing and killing four people, trespassing and other crimes in Nagano and Aichi prefectures in 2003 and 2004.

He was executed at the Tokyo Detention Center. The sentence was finalized two years ago. With the latest executions, the number of inmates on death row decreased to 95.

For three of the people hanged Thursday, the interval between their death and the finalization of their sentence was two years and six months or shorter. Mori has said the optimal interval should be six months, although it tends to be longer because defense attorneys normally file requests for retrials or pardons.

Amnesty International Japan released a statement condemning the executions.

"Japan must recognize its international responsibility to establish a judicial system that does not rely on capital punishment as it ratifies various human rights treaties," the international human rights organization said.

More than 70 percent of countries in the world have either abolished the death sentence or have otherwise effectively halted executions, it said.

South Korea has staged no executions in 10 years, while Taiwan has abstained for three years, Amnesty said. China has dramatically decreased executions, it added.

The United States, the only country in the Group of Eight besides Japan that has capital punishment, has been holding fewer executions, while Islamic countries also are becoming more cautious about applying the death sentence, the group said.

"Japan is the only country where executions are

increasing," the organization said.

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