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Besieged underworld regroup Yamaguchi-gumi-style M&A solidifies ranks, power

By ERIC TALMADGE

KOBE (AP) Tucked behind a high wall and a row of trees on a quiet street corner, the headquarters of Japan's largest underworld syndicate could almost pass for just another upscale mansion. Except for all the surveillance cameras. And the barbed wire. And the comings and goings of sharply dressed men in sunglasses and crew cuts.

Especially lately.

In its biggest shakeup in 16 years, the Yamaguchi-gumi named a new boss last month with a flurry of vows made over sake behind the walls of its headquarters in the port city of Kobe. Soon after, police reported another big move by the 40,000-strong gang -- it absorbed a large syndicate in Tokyo, traditionally one of its weaker markets.

If it seemed to play like a routine corporate merger in the media and police communiqués, it's because the yakuza has a place of its own in the power structure. Police deployed in strength outside the mansion weren't there to make arrests so much as to intervene if the meeting turned violent. But there were no incidents.

Police confirmed the meeting took place but aren't commenting on the bigger picture inside the Yamaguchi-gumi, so it isn't clear why Yoshinori Watanabe chose to step down as boss and let his No. 2, Kenichi Shinoda, take over.

But experts believe the syndicate's recent moves reflect a larger mob restructuring.

"The trend for mobsters to join up with the biggest gangs is getting stronger, and this is a good example," said Kanehiro Hoshino, a Teikyo University criminologist. "The new boss is almost certainly going to push hard to expand the syndicate's reach."

Although Japan prides itself on low levels of violence and street crime, its gangsters are among the world's wealthiest. They bring in billions of dollars a year from extortion, gambling, prostitution, Internet pornography, guns, drugs, and real estate and construction kickbacks.

Police say their number is growing, and the Yamaguchi-gumi is swallowing them up faster than ever.

At the end of last year, there were 87,000 gangsters, 70.5 percent of them affiliated with the country's three largest mob syndicates, according to the National Police Agency. The Yamaguchi-gumi grew by 1,100 to 39,200 to



A man passes in front of a sign in a Kobe park that says "Get Rid of the Underworld."

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- ☐ Wasn't aware of the gap.

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comprise 45.1 percent of Japan's total underworld members -- and that was before absorbing the 1,000-strong Nippon Kokusui-kai, one of Tokyo's oldest and strongest gangs.

Consolidation makes good business sense in Japanese gangland. The "big three" are tightly organized in a pyramid style, with gangsters paying cuts to their bosses, and their bosses paying increasingly large fees to their overlords. In exchange, members get protection and help in fending off rivals, and can use their affiliation with a major syndicate to pressure extortion victims.

Gangsters in major affiliates can also take bigger risks because they're guaranteed a support network if they go to prison. Promised cash rewards and promotions after they've done their time, some even carry out revenge hits and then turn themselves in.

The Yamaguchi-gumi's new boss did just that. Shinoda, 63, was convicted of stabbing another gangster to death and served 13 years in prison beginning in the 1970s.

"He did his time quietly," said Shinji Ishihara, a former Yamaguchi-gumi member who knew him in prison. "Prison life is hard. But he was a very patient, very strong man. He was proud of what he had done. He wasn't your average prisoner."

Before 1992, gangsters made little effort to hide their affiliations.

Headquarters were marked with gaudy signs, and members proudly wore their gang's logo in the lapels of their suits. Police tended to look the other way because of the tacit understanding that the mob would avoid killings outside of their own ranks, and would at times provide authorities with information. Top-level gangsters also often had close ties with business and political leaders.

But the main gangs got too brazen and violent, and after a police officer was shot in Okinawa, authorities cracked down. A registry of gang members was created, surveillance was increased and extortion laws toughened.

Though still powerful and well-connected, gangsters who had openly flaunted their mob affiliations were forced underground and diversified their operations in the stock and real estate markets -- gray areas where convictions are harder to obtain.

Hoping to gain momentum, the 240,000-strong NPA has vowed to renew the pressure and will deploy 10,000 more officers around Japan over the next three years.

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