

Police must take stalking seriously

The tragic case of Ms. Saaya Suzuki highlights an urgent need for the Metropolitan Police Department to overhaul how it handles stalking cases. Despite having asked the police last week for help in connection with a man who had been harassing her, Ms. Suzuki, an 18-year-old high school student, was stabbed around 5 p.m. Tuesday at her residence in Mitaka, Tokyo, and later died. The police arrested a suspect, 21-year-old Mr. Charles Thomas Ikenaga, about 90 minutes after the stabbing on a street near the crime scene.

On the morning of Oct. 8, the Mitaka police tried to call the man three times on his cellphone to issue a warning but took no further action other than to leave a message for him to contact them on his phone when he did not answer. The police made the calls at the girl's request and because the stalking law requires the police to first give an oral warning to stalkers, then a written warning if they do not stop their harassment.

It seems that the police learned nothing from past murders committed by stalkers in Zushi, Kanagawa Prefecture, and Saikai, Nagasaki Prefecture. The MPD must strictly scrutinize the police's handling of the case and overhaul procedures to prevent such tragedies in the future.

Mr. Ikenaga told the police that he met Ms. Suzuki, a budding actress, on Facebook about two years ago and the two dated until last fall. After their breakup he began pressuring her to see him again and she broke off communications with him. She saw Mr. Ikenaga near her house on Oct. 1 and again on the morning of Oct.

4 so she consulted with her homeroom teacher and called the Suginami police station near her school on the afternoon of Oct. 4. The Suginami police officer who took her call told her to contact the police station in Mitaka, where she lived. He didn't bother to log the meeting or to phone the Mitaka police — a fact that shows the police officer didn't consider her complaint to be a serious matter.

On Oct. 7 she told her teacher that she was frightened because Mr. Ikenaga was stalking her and had threatened to kill her. The vice principal told her to go to the police. Ms. Suzuki and her mother visited the Mitaka police station on Oct. 8 and explained the man's bizarre behavior, including an e-mail he had sent in which he stated that he would die if she did not send him her photo. At that point the Mitaka police tried to call him. A Mitaka policeman called the girl around 4:30 p.m. to confirm her safety. About 20 minutes after she said that she had arrived home, she was attacked by Mr. Ikenaga, who reportedly had broken into her house and was hiding in a closet when she got home.

Although the stalking law instructs police to first issue an oral warning to stalkers, the police should have realized that given the grave nature of Mr. Ikenaga's threats, there was a strong possibility that he could become upset by their involvement and go after her. They should have taken concrete measures to ensure her personal safety, such as placing her in a safe facility, and then sought to take Mr. Ikenaga into custody for questioning. The police's failure to take the case seriously enough cost Ms. Suzuki her life. They must not make such a mistake again.