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TOKYO CONFIDENTIAL

Japanese bounty hunter in America wants you dead or alive

By GEOFF BOTTING

Flash (May 6-13)

Shuichi Araki has one of the most dangerous jobs around.

"This isn't the kind of work for someone who values their life," he says to Flash. "But just to be safe, I need my body armor, and I've even decided to get grenades for myself."

Araki, a 39-year-old Japanese national, is a bounty hunter in the United States. His job, the stuff of many a Hollywood movie, is to track down and collar fugitives. Some of them are desperate and highly dangerous.

"Once, just as I had completely restrained a fugitive, his wife started attacking me with a meat cleaver. I managed to escape just as she was about to bring the cleaver down on my head," he recalls.

As far as anyone knows, Araki, a Los Angeles resident, is the only Japanese among the 30,000 bounty hunters, or "bail enforcement agents" as some prefer to be called, in the United States.

It's a job that requires plenty of courage, physical strength and marksmanship, not to mention sharp investigative skills.

Araki is certified by the U.S. Justice Department to go after criminal suspects who flee from the law. His bosses are bail agents, the people who post bail bonds for suspects on trial. The agents pay him for every fugitive he collars, with payments equaling 20 percent of the total amount of bail the fugitive had posted.

Tokyo Confidential surveys popular vernacular magazines — often "salacious, libelous and utterly unreliable" — to discover what the Japanese are "really thinking."

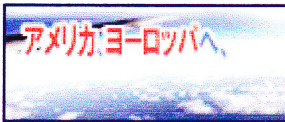
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"Once I made \$20,000 for a single capture, but in a good month I'll generally earn around \$3,500," he says.

Much bigger pickings, Flash notes, can be had on the other side of the globe.

Since the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, then the war in Afghanistan, and most recently the invasion of Iraq, the U.S. government has been offering rewards of up to \$200,000 for the most-wanted figures in the Middle East and Central Asia.

Araki, however, has yet to bag himself an Iraqi general or al-Qaeda chief.

"An Asian person in Baghdad would certainly stand out, so I haven't gone."

Yet he did make a recent trip to Pakistan to scout out the possibilities of tracking down members of the al-Qaeda terrorist network implicated in the Sept. 11 attacks. He quickly gave that plan up after encountering an extraordinary amount of intimidation and violence directed at him as he walked the streets.

Araki has had, by Japanese standards at least, something of a rough upbringing.

At the age of 15, he dropped out of school to help support his family after his father's business failed. Not long afterward, his mother died — he doesn't say how — after being pursued by the yakuza, who were trying to collect some of his father's debts.

The teenage Araki managed to find work at a private investigation agency, and at the age of 28 he went to the United States to embark on his career as a bounty hunter.

He says he has never had to kill anyone in the line of duty, though he once came close.

"This wanted criminal wouldn't say where his buddy was located, so I put a single bullet in my revolver, shoved it against his head and pulled the trigger. It was a kind of Russian roulette," he says.

"But the gun didn't fire that time."

Shikoku pilgrims embark on spiritual trek

By MARK SCHREIBER

Shukan Diamond (May 3)

Shikoku, the smallest of Japan's four main islands, was not linked to Honshu by bridge until 1988. Now, reports Shukan Diamond, three massive bridges span the Inland Sea.