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Cult founder Hogen Fukunaga arrested in Tokyo

Japanese police have arrested twelve leading figures in a "foot cult" that says it can diagnose followers' illnesses by examining the soles of their feet.

Those detained include Hogen Fukunaga, the charismatic founder of the Ho-no-Hana Sampogyo religious group.

Media reports say the cult is believed to have defrauded an estimated 30,000 followers of about 81bn yen (\$750m) since 1987, when it was officially recognised as a religious group.

The cult, based at the foot of Mount Fuji, promised that medical problems could be cured by joining the group and paying for "special" training.

Denies wrongdoing

Mr Fukunaga claimed the shape of people's feet revealed their personality, with short toes signifying short tempers and fat toes foretelling good fortune.

Speaking after his arrest, he denied any wrongdoing, insisting that he had told his followers what he heard from heaven.

Group spokesman Ichiro Takeda issued a statement describing the arrests as "a thunderbolt from the blue".

"These arrests are for us like dying a thousands deaths," he said. "We are not engaged in brain washing or mind control... and the group was not set up for the purpose of amassing money."

Tokyo police said they arrested Mr Fukunaga on suspicion of defrauding five people of 25m yen (\$230,000) in the mid-1990s.

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A police spokesman said Mr Fukunaga had told followers: "If you do nothing, you will get cancer. If you follow the voice of heaven, you will get well", before taking their money.

The cult is also alleged to have instructed members to buy expensive goods from other recruits.

Concern

Mr Fukunaga, 55, announced his resignation as leader in January amid growing public concern about the sect's practices.

But it is believed that he still controls the group's followers.

Last month, a Japanese court ordered the cult and Mr Fukunaga to pay 227.2m yen (\$2.12m) to 27 former followers.

The decision was the first ruling against Ho-no-Hana Sampogyo, which now faces legal action by about 1,100 people seeking further damages.

The Japanese authorities have cracked down recently on fringe religious groups suspected of illegal practices, amid fears that membership of anti-social groups is rising.

The cult's name roughly translates as "Flower of Law and Three Law Practice".

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