

Hiroshima's Hibakusha Aging as Fight for Abolishing Nuclear Weapons Continues

Hiroshima, Japan - The morning of August 6, 1945, under the black sky, 12-year-old Seiko Ikeda, passing by countless bodies burned from head to toe, headless, or floating in the river, made her way to the hospital 10 kilometers outside Hiroshima near where her house was.

She passed by bodies with eyes melted from the heat and bodies split open and intestines coming out. Wandering past the groans of people in suffering she covered her ears and bowed, repeating *sumimasen*, sorry, to everyone she saw. She could not ease the cries of the whole city.

A woman in a nearby house removed the curtains from the window and wrapped her in them to cover what her incinerated clothes could not. She continued on toward the hospital. Finding a truck transporting people there, she climbed on.

Outside of the hospital she was met with people who were badly burned lying all around the ground, and she assumed they were already dead. Her body had been burned from head to toe, looking much like those she saw, she was sure.

With so few nurses and doctors and so many wounded, someone eventually attended to her. As they began to unwrap the curtain from her body, her melted and burned skin came too. There was no medicine.

“There were lots of injured people lying around. They were charred like a burned fish. There were wounded people everywhere. At first I thought, ‘this poor person!’ You look at someone like that and feel compassion for them, but then when you see so many then you stop feeling anything,” said Ikeda.

For now 82-year-old Ikeda, her journey through gruesome sights of death, destruction and survival serve as one of the last reminders from history to inform future generations that nuclear weapons should be abolished.

"War is something that humans create. Therefore humans, through courage and warm heartedness, and love, and efforts can get rid of nuclear weapons. We can also abolish war if we want to. We have to pray and have hope for our decedents in the 21st century," said Ikeda.

For 70 years, Hiroshima—the first city ever attacked by an atomic bomb—has been the center for the global movement aimed at ridding the world of nuclear weapons and establishing global peace.

As the world readies for the landmark anniversary of the bombing and the end of WWII, Hiroshima's mission faces a new challenge. With the generation of the 1945 A-bomb *hibakusha* aging and dying off, many feel a new urgency in the fight for peace and global disarmament of nuclear weapons.

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The world is increasingly preoccupied with the horror of nuclear weapons as the threat increases with the possession of nuclear weapons in Iran, North Korea, and with the growing tension between India and Pakistan.

Under the terms of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, or the Non-Proliferation Treaty, of the 190 parties signed, only five are recognized as nuclear-weapons states, and are therefore allowed to possess nuclear weapons: United States, Russia, France, United Kingdom, and China.

With the scientific and political facts surrounding the nuclear weapons debate often taking lead in many conversations around the world, the *hibakusha* in Hiroshima remain one of the last direct connections to the only occurrence in history of a direct attack of nuclear weapon on humans. Its echo reaches to the center of the conversation of peace.

With the 70th anniversary approaching this August, those advocating for peace are hoping to be heard.

“Hiroshima means to me that those are words of wisdom, and that we should have learned by now, because we have seen the physical manifestation of when we use weapons. And we don't need any more examples. There's frustration and impatience that it's taking so long, given that we have Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The notion that we would ponder it even with proof,” said Martin Fleck, Security Program Director for Physicians for Social Responsibility—an organization that seeks to address issues concerning nuclear weapons, climate change, toxic chemicals, and nuclear power.

For *hibakusha* and others, the main purpose of Hiroshima is to act as a witness to what happened there 70 years ago on August 6, 1945.

“It is our duty to tell the story of what happened to the *hibakusha*. As long as we don’t forget what happened, then we won’t create conditions that will allow it to happen again,” said Etsuko Nakatani, who was born after the war to two survivors of the Hiroshima atomic bomb. (A second-generation A-bomb survivor, or offspring of those who survived the bomb.)

Many of these second generation survivors have made it their effort to carry on the legacy of their parents and of those survivors who are quickly dwindling in numbers. Nakatani is part of an organization of second-generation survivors who work to preserve and tell the stories of *hibakusha*.

While people such as Ikeda and Nakatani work to keep the *hibakusha* stories alive, others are hoping to inform the world of other dangers surrounding the nuclear weapons of today. As one Historian at the Hiroshima Peace Institute, Bo Jacobs, put it, looking to the bomb dropped on Hiroshima to explain today’s nuclear weapons would be similar to looking at guns from the 1600s to inform about today’s guns.

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The atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima, nicknamed “Little Boy,” weighed around eight tons. Compared to the Tsar Bomb, the largest bomb ever built – which detonates with the force of 3,800 Hiroshima’s combined – “Little Boy” is like a drop in the ocean.

“I think the real lesson that continues to inspire the movement is that it can happen, and the weapons that made the destruction not only still exist, but exist in the thousands,” said John Loretz, Program Director for the International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War.

Today there are nearly 20,000 nuclear weapons between at least nine countries, with the United States and Russia accumulating nearly 95 percent of that total number. Nearly 4000 of those weapons are on-the-ready on missiles or bases with operational forces.

“These types of weapons do not keep the peace,” said Yasuyoshi Komizo, Secretary General for Mayors for Peace, an international organization with partners in 160 countries or regions with nearly 7,000 member cities.

According to research done by the International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War in *Nuclear Famine: Two Billion People at Risk?*, if 100 of the existing nuclear weapons are used today it would alter the climate to such a degree that it has the potential to put the human race at

risk. The effects of the weapons would cause a global shift in agriculture, causing an epidemic of world hunger that would impact at least 2 billion people over the span of a decade.

“Everything starts there. Those were the first places nuclear weapons were used. It was the first time the world saw what they were capable of. A-bomb survivor population telling their stories: it’s all important. But while it’s emotional, the overall knowledge of [the weapons’] impact drives us,” said Loretz.

With organizations like Physicians for Social Responsibility and International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear Weapons advocating against the all-encompassing effects and impacts of nuclear war, the humanitarian aspect and the stories of survivors is what keeps the public interested, and is feared to be lost.

“We’re working hard to show something with very low visibility. That’s the value of Hiroshima: you go there and there’s the dome, still standing there, still ruined, still crushed and burnt, and there it is. And that is very highly visible,” said Fleck.

Although the nuclear weapons of today are much larger and powerful, the “small” bomb that was dropped in Hiroshima, it continues to echo in the daily lives of the people living in the city. Etched on a silver oval plaque on the sidewalk in the city reads: *Promenade of Peace*. With the Memorial Peace Park siting in the center of the city, it serves as a reminder to all its passers-by.

The A-Bomb Dome sits at the edge of the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum near the river. Set against the backdrop of a city rebuilt with paved streets and tall buildings, its skeleton reminds of the death and suffering that once lingered there.

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The building is a significant symbol of peace in the city, because it was one of the few to survive the bomb so close to the hypocenter of the explosion. The hypocenter is marked nonchalantly by a plaque and memorial on an inconspicuous sidewalk, hiding obviously out of sight.

At the Mutsumien Hibakusha Nursing home in Hiroshima, 70 years after the atomic bomb was dropped on their city, a few of the residents sat in the room with workers from the local World Friendship Center. They tried their best to sing along to *O Susanna* with the Japanese version printed underneath the English.

Not sure of the words or rhythm, they sat with their lips slightly moving or not moving at all. Their grayed hair and indication of the years they’ve seen. After 35 minutes of singing old

English folk songs, *Happy Birthday* was sung in Japanese to each of the seven sitting in the room, and a quaint bouquet of purple lilacs was handed to each one.

Between each small birthday celebration, the woman with the ventriloquist doll, Mitchiko Yamane, Chairwoman for the World Friendship Center, asked the same small questions.

“How old are you now?” she asked. “Ninety-two,” one resident responded happily, and the few in the room clapped.

“Where were you when the bomb was dropped? How old were you?” she asked them one-by-one. Each one recounting flatly, in under a few minutes, where they were and how old they had been, usually adding what happened to their families or others they were close to.

“The root of peace is from having an understanding of others’ suffering in your heart,” said Ikeda.