

SECOND CONFERENCE ON THE HUMANITARIAN IMPACT OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS

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Speech by Ms. Setsuko Thurlow

Dear colleagues from around the world engaged in the urgent task of abolishing nuclear weapons,

I feel privileged to have this opportunity to share my experience of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, at this conference in Mexico, a country I respect for leading the establishment of the world's first nuclear-weapon-free zone, the Tlatelolco Treaty. That was a significant achievement, indeed. Thanks also to the International Red Cross for reviving this fundamental discussion about the humanitarian consequences of nuclear war.

That fateful day, August 6, 1945, as a 13 year old grade 8 student and a member of the Student Mobilization Program I was at the Army headquarters, 1.8 km away from ground zero. About 30 other students and I were assigned to work as decoding assistants of secret messages. At 8:15 AM, as Major Yanai was giving us a pep talk at the assembly, suddenly, I saw out the window a blinding bluish-white flash and I remember having the sensation of floating in the air. As I regained consciousness in the silence and the darkness, I found myself pinned by the ruins of a collapsed building. I could not move, and I knew I was faced with death. I began to hear my classmates' faint cries, "Mother, help me" "God, help me". Then, suddenly, I felt hands touching my left shoulder, and heard a man's voice saying, "Don't give up! Keep moving! Keep pushing! I am trying to free you. See the light coming through that opening. Crawl towards it and get out as quickly as possible." As I crawled out, the ruins were already on fire. Most of my classmates who were with me in the same room were burned alive. A soldier ordered me and two other surviving girls to escape to the nearby hills.

I looked around the outside world. Although it was morning, it was as dark as twilight because of the dust and smoke rising up in the air. I saw streams of ghostly figures, slowly shuffling from the centre of the city towards the nearby hills. I say "ghostly" because they did not look like human beings; their hair stood straight upward and they were naked and tattered, bleeding, burned, blackened and swollen. Parts of their bodies were missing, flesh and skin hanging from their bones, some with their eyeballs hanging in their hands, and some with their stomachs burst open, with intestines hanging out. We students joined the ghostly procession, carefully stepping over the dead and dying. There was a deathly silence broken only by the moans of the injured and their pleas for water. The foul stench of burned skin filled the air.

We managed to escape to the foot of the hill where there was an army training ground, about the size of two football fields. Practically every bit of it was covered with the dead and injured, who were desperately begging, often in faint whispers, "Water, water, please give me water." But we had no containers to carry any water. We went to a nearby stream to wash off the blood and dirt from our bodies. Then we tore off our blouses, soaked them with water and hurried back to hold them to the mouths of the injured, who desperately sucked in the moisture. We did not see any doctors or nurses all day. When darkness fell, we sat on the hillside and watched all night the

entire city burn, numbed by the massive and grotesque scale of death and suffering we had witnessed.

My father left town early that morning, my mother was rescued from under our collapsed home, my sister and her four year old son were burned beyond recognition while going to the doctor's office, an aunt and two cousins were found as skeletons, and my sister-in-law is still missing. We rejoiced the survival of my uncle and his wife, but about ten days later they died covered with purple spots all over their bodies, and their internal organs seemed to be liquified. My own age group of over 8,000 grade 7 and 8 students from all the high schools in the city were engaged in the task of clearing fire lanes in the centre of the city. Many of them were killed instantly by the heat of 4,000 degrees Celsius. Many were simply carbonized or vaporized. Radiation, the unique characteristic of the atomic bombing, affected people in mysterious and random ways, with some dying instantly, and others weeks, months or years later by the delayed effects. Radiation is still killing survivors, 69 years later.

Thus, my beloved city of Hiroshima suddenly became desolation, with heaps of ash and rubble, skeletons and blackened corpses. Out of a population of 360,000, most of whom were non-combatant women, children and elderly, became victims of the indiscriminate massacre of the atomic bombing. By the end of 1945, approximately 140,000 had perished. As of the present day, at least 260,000 have perished in Hiroshima alone as a result of the effects of the blast, heat and radiation. As I use the numbers of the dead, it pains me deeply. Reducing the dead to numbers seems to me to be trivializing their precious lives and negating their human dignity.

Not only did people have to endure the physical devastation of near-starvation, homelessness, lack of medical care, rapidly spreading social discrimination against survivors as (*quote*)"contaminated ones by nuclear poison"(*unquote*), total lack of service by the Japanese government, the collapse of the authoritarian, militaristic social system, and the sudden introduction to a democratic way of life, but also they suffered from psycho-social control by the Allied Forces Occupation Authority following Japan's surrender. The Occupation Authorities censored media coverage of survivors' suffering and confiscated their diaries, literary writings, films, photographs, medical records, etc. Following the massive trauma of the bombing, survivors had to repress themselves in silence and isolation, and were thus deprived of the normal process of grieving.

After the end of the seven - year occupation, a flood of information suddenly and for the first time became available, enabling the survivors to contemplate the meaning of our survival in historical perspective and global context. We became convinced that no human being should ever have to repeat our experience of the inhumanity, illegality, immorality and cruelty of the atomic bombing, and that our mission was to warn the world about the threat of this ultimate evil. We believe that, "Humanity and nuclear weapons cannot coexist", and it is our moral imperative to abolish nuclear weapons in order to secure a safe, clean and just world for future generations. With this conviction we have been speaking out around the world for the past several decades for the total abolition of nuclear weapons.

Yet, as we examine the current reality of the world's efforts for nuclear disarmament we are dismayed and disturbed to see the lack of tangible progress toward the goal. Instead, we see the obvious lack of political will for nuclear disarmament by the nuclear weapons states demonstrated by the non-ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, non-compliance to fulfill the legal obligation of Article 6 of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, the 15-year deadlock in the Conference on Disarmament, the failure to negotiate a nuclear weapons-free zone in the Middle East, the continued modernization of nuclear weapons, etc. This is an unacceptable reality that needs to be changed.

Although we hibakusha have spent our life energy to warn people about the hell that is nuclear war, in nearly 70 years there has been little progress in the field of nuclear disarmament. We therefore urgently need a new path, one that recognizes the utterly unacceptable humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons — weapons we have a moral obligation to prohibit. It is our hope that this new movement to ban nuclear weapons will finally lead us to a nuclear weapon free world.

The time has come for non-nuclear weapons states and civil society to initiate a nuclear weapons ban for the sake of humanity.

You and I, together, we can. We must.