

# **Hiroshima-Nagasaki: Atomic Bomb Victims Stand Alone - “The survivors suffer a double injury”**

Monday 30 May 2016, by [KTO Norihiro](#) (Date first published: 13 August 2014).

TOKYO — This newspaper’s recent obituary for Theodore Van Kirk, the last living crew member of the Enola Gay — the plane that dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima — closed with a quote from a 1995 interview with Mr. Van Kirk. “It’s really hard to talk about morality and war in the same sentence,” he was cited as saying. “Where was the morality in the bombing of Coventry, or the bombing of Dresden, or the Bataan Death March, or the Rape of Nanking, or the bombing of Pearl Harbor?”

Mr. Van Kirk was right. Everyday morality falls mute before the horrors of war. And yet I can’t help feeling that, from the perspective of the victims, the atomic bombings on Hiroshima and Nagasaki are different: Something distinguishes those attacks from the Bataan Death March, the Rape of Nanking, the bombing of Dresden or the Holocaust.

The difference lies not in the atrocities themselves, but in the attitude the world has taken toward them. The international community has reached a consensus regarding all those other horrors: They violated international law; they never should have occurred in the first place; they must never be permitted to happen again. The few individuals who defend the Holocaust, for instance, are not only condemned but reviled.

The situation is completely different with respect to the atomic bombings. Even if most people around the world privately believe the indiscriminate killing of civilians with nuclear weapons is wrong, there is no shared public consensus to this effect. The international community has not prohibited the use of nuclear weapons, as it has done with the use of poison gas and other chemical and biological weapons.

The permanent members of the United Nations Security Council oppose the notion of an unconditional ban; they themselves possess nuclear weapons and want to reserve their “right” to use them. And while in a 1996 advisory opinion the International Court of Justice stated that “the threat or use of nuclear weapons would generally be contrary to the rules of international law applicable in armed conflict,” it would not declare the threat or use of nuclear weapons illegal under all conditions. In particular, it said, “the Court cannot conclude definitively whether the threat or use of nuclear weapons would be lawful or unlawful in an extreme circumstance of self-defense, in which the very survival of a State would be at stake.”

In a sense, this is only natural. Since the standing members of the Security Council are all nuclear states, the balance of power within the United Nations itself might come into question if nuclear weapons were banned. The “threat or use” of nuclear weapons may “generally be contrary to the rules of international law applicable in armed conflict,” and it is certainly inhumane, but it is the

foundation of the entire world order.

And so the survivors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki suffer a double injury. Unlike the victims of, say, the Holocaust, who can at least take strength in knowing that the world stands with them, the victims of the atomic bombings have stood alone for decades.

Even the Japanese government has abandoned them: Not once has it protested the dropping of those two bombs. Whatever the American government's reasons for not admitting that the attacks were illegal and for not offering an apology, the Japanese government has a responsibility of its own toward its citizens.

This year in March, the number of survivors — the *hibakusha*, as they are called — fell to 192,719. They were 79.44 years old on average. Soon enough, they will all be gone, and then no one who was directly involved in the bombings, whether from the air or on the ground, will be left.

Yet the *hibakusha*'s suffering is not always given the acknowledgment it deserves, not even at the annual ceremonies commemorating the attacks: The speeches Prime Minister Shinzo Abe made last week, on Aug. 6 in Hiroshima and Aug. 9 in Nagasaki, were largely recycled from the addresses he gave last year. Sixty-nine years after the bombings, the victims are still waiting for the rest of the world to imagine what it is like to endure what they have endured.

When the Japan Confederation of A- and H-bomb Sufferers Organizations was founded in 1956, it called on the world to abolish nuclear weapons. But it also voiced support for nuclear energy: "Atomic power, which has a tendency to follow the road to destruction and extermination," the group said in one statement, must be turned into "a servant for the happiness and prosperity of humankind." In the wake of the March 11, 2011, tsunami and the nuclear catastrophe it triggered at Fukushima, this stance — which many *hibakusha* organizations had maintained until the disaster — was criticized as naïve. But who can blame victims with no hope, and no support, for wanting to find a way of turning the evil they suffered into some good?

And who can blame the *hibakusha* for placing outsized faith in President Obama when he delivered his first anti-nuclear speech in April 2009? I, for one, will not forget the moving Op-Ed that the designer Issey Miyake, a Hiroshima native, published in this newspaper a few months later. After describing his memories of the day the bomb was dropped on the city, he wrote, "There is a movement in Hiroshima to invite Mr. Obama to Universal Peace Day on Aug. 6 — the annual commemoration of that fateful day. I hope he will accept."

When Mr. Obama was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2009, in part for promoting nuclear nonproliferation, he said, "I will accept this award as a call to action." He has two and a half years left in office to respond to that call.

**Norihiro Kato**

---

**P.S.**

\* A version of this op-ed appears in print on August 14, 2014, in The International New York Times. AUG. 13, 2014:

[http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/14/opinion/norihiro-kato-atomic-bomb-victims-stand-alone.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/14/opinion/norihiro-kato-atomic-bomb-victims-stand-alone.html?_r=0)

\* Norihiro Kato is a literary critic and a professor emeritus of Waseda University. This article was translated by Michael Emmerich from the Japanese.