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By Wakamiya Yoshibumi

On the afternoon of Aug. 7, 1945, the Imperial Headquarters in Tokyo made the following announcement: (1) "Yesterday, Aug. 6, Hiroshima was attacked by a small number of enemy B29s and suffered severe damage.", and (2) "While it appears that the enemy used a new type bomb for the aforementioned attack, we are currently looking into the situation in detail."

When the announcement was made, people in Hiroshima were in a living hell. Two days later, a second atomic bomb was dropped on Nagasaki.

A blinding flash, followed instantaneously by a violent explosion and radiation, killed many people. Countless survivors eventually succumbed to agonizing deaths. Even now, people still suffer from the aftereffects. To date, the death toll in Hiroshima from the bombing stands at 237,000. For Nagasaki, the figure is 135,000. Ordinary citizens and children accounted for most of those who died or were injured.

On Aug. 10, Japan lodged a formal protest with the United States, saying, "The use of bombs that are incomparably more indiscriminate and atrocious than any conventional weapons and projectiles is a new crime against human culture." The protest was ignored and Japan surrendered unconditionally on Aug. 15.

Japan must own up to guilt

That was 60 years ago this month.

The scars of the bombings are much in evidence.

The atomic bombs were dropped after repeated air raids by U.S. bombers on Tokyo and other cities. In the 2004 movie "The Fog of War," Robert McNamara said the United States would have been guilty of war crimes if it had lost the war. McNamara was involved in the U.S. effort against Japan under the command of Gen. Curtis LeMay and later became U.S. secretary of defense.

But victors never admit they were at fault. At the peace festival (later peace memorial ceremony for A-bomb victims) held in Hiroshima on Aug. 6, 1948, to mark the third anniversary of the bombing, commander-in-chief Horace Robertson of the British Commonwealth Occupation Force delivered a speech in which he referred to the punishment inflicted on Hiroshima as an act of retaliation against Japan as a whole.

Robertson attended the ceremony on behalf of the occupational forces.

Were it not for the atomic bombs, Japan probably would not have surrendered and instead waged fierce resistance in a ground battle on its mainland. Why should Japan, which started the war, present itself as a victim of atomic bombings? It doesn't seem right. That is the logic and emotional response of many people in the United States. When the Hiroshima Atomic Bomb Dome was added to the list of World Heritage sites in 1996, the U.S. government objected.

But was it really necessary to drop an atomic bomb on a densely populated city center just after 8 a.m. on a Monday morning when people had just started their week? Was the United States simply trying to find out what the bomb could do? Although Japan and the United States ended up forming a close postwar alliance, we are left with uneasy feelings over the atomic bombings.

On the other hand, it is not fair to pin all the blame on the United States. That is how I felt as I watched recently two aired programs on Japan Broadcasting Corp.'s "NHK Special." They are "Okinawa Yomigaeru Senjo" (Okinawa, a battle-ground brought back to life), which was shown June 18, and "Bokura ha Gyokusai Shinakatta-Shonen Shojo-tachi no Saipan-sen" (We did not die honorable deaths-the youth's battle of Saipan), which aired July 2.

In Okinawa Prefecture and on Saipan, islanders were told to commit mass suicide after having been forced to fight a hopeless battle alongside Imperial Japanese Army troops.

In Okinawa, residents of an entire village were shot to death by Japanese soldiers, who suspected they were U.S. spies. In Saipan, islanders leaped to their deaths from cliffs, crying "Long live the emperor," or charged at the enemy in desperation. Many families committed suicide together using grenades that were distributed to them for that purpose. I was speechless as I listened to accounts from aging residents of both islands who narrowly escaped death and recalled their "hell on Earth" experiences.

A common thread in all the accounts was that people who followed orders to commit suicide did so because they had been brainwashed into believing that choosing an honorable death was better than staying alive and being subjected to humiliation as prisoners. The teaching advocated by Minister of the Army Tojo Hideki, who later became prime minister, was aimed at instilling awareness of Japan's imperial rule and bolstering the people's fighting spirit. It applied not only to soldiers but also to the ordinary population.

This is the reality of 60 years ago. What right did the Japanese government have to criticize the United States for indiscriminately attacking civilians?

War changes people

"We must not make swarming locusts out of humans" read an editorial of The Asahi Shimbun dated Jan. 5, 1997. It likened people to locusts and grasshoppers that, triggered by famine, suddenly multiply and form black, belligerent swarms that consume crops.

At the time, civil war was raging in the former Yugoslavia. Even though the people there are known for their hospitality, ethnic confrontation led them to kill each other.

"People can be friendly or aggressive. They are fickle. They are easily influenced by the atmosphere of the groups to which they belong and once they get out of control, it is difficult to stop them," the editorial read. I often remember this piece written by an editorial writer who died last year.

War changes people. What was once unbelievable becomes common sense. The atomic bombs dropped by the United States-a country committed to fighting oppressive totalitarianism-embody the ultimate contradiction and horror of humans.

For a long time, the nuclear powers managed to keep their arsenals to themselves. However, nuclear weapons have proliferated, which was one of the reasons given by the United States for invading Iraq. The world is also troubled by North Korea, which has declared nuclear weapons programs.
Terrorism is raging in Iraq, where there were no nuclear weapons. Suicide bombers have attacked London and Egypt.

Nuclear weapons and suicide bombers have one thing in common. They both indiscriminately kill civilians. What would happen if nuclear weapons traded in the black market are used for terrorist attacks?

We must not make swarming locusts out of humans. Once again, I feel the significance of these words.

Wakamiya Yoshibumi heads The Asahi Shimbun editorial board. This article appeared in IHT/Asahi Shimbun, August 1,2005. Posted at Japan Focus on August 1, 2005.

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