The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus
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A Letter to the Citizens of Hiroshima and Nagasaki From a Hibakusha residing in Okinawa

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沖縄在住被爆者より広島・長崎市民への手紙　月下美紀

Tsukishita Miki and Yuki TANAKA　**The Asahi Shimbun report is available in Japanese here**

Introduction

Tsukishita Miki, an A-bomb survivor, recently sent copies of the following letter to the mayors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki as well as to the U.S. Embassy in Tokyo shortly before U.S. President Barack Obama visited Japan on November 13. Tsukishita was four years and seven months old when the city of Hiroshima was destroyed and many civilians instantly annihilated by the atomic bombing on the morning of August 6, 1945. He was four kilometers away from the hypocenter when the atomic bomb exploded. Miraculously he survived.

Tsukushita Miki

As Tsukishita compellingly describes in his letter, he has never been free from the "haunting memory of the unforgettable experience" of the atomic bombing, despite his young age at the time it occurred. Thus this horrific experience profoundly has affected his attitude towards life. As a university student in the 1960's he was involved in the student movement opposing Japan's re-militarization and Ampo, the US-Japan Security Treaty, as well as in the anti-pollution movement in Minamata. Leaving the university without completing his degree, he went to work for a private Japanese trading company. In the late 1960's and early '70's, he lived in Holland, working at a Dutch branch office of the company. While in Europe he visited Auschwitz and many other war commemoration and memorial sites, which led him to reflect deeply on peace and humanity. He also traveled to the Sahara Desert and saw the ancient cave paintings at Tassili N'Ajjer, which led him to realize the immense strength and durability that fine art possesses. He consequently believes that art should be fully utilized to promote peace. Returning to Japan, he resigned from the company and set up his own art and design production company. At the same time he started producing his own Chinese-ink paintings. Since the early 1980s he has held a series of exhibitions of his own work entitled "A Peace Monologue," combining his artwork with various types of peace-promoting activities such as a hunger relief campaign for poverty-stricken nations, both within and outside Japan. In 2006, he moved to Okinawa to concentrate on his art, while remaining deeply involved in peace and anti-nuclear movements.

Tsukushita artwork

In his grand speech in Tokyo on November 14, Obama repeatedly emphasized the importance of “human dignity” before an invited audience of 1,600. He stated that:

> ‘the United States will never waver in speaking up for the fundamental values that we hold dear - and that includes respect for the religion and cultures of all people - because *support for human rights and human dignity is ingrained in America*.’
>
> ‘*The longing for liberty and dignity is a part of the story of all peoples*. For there are certain aspirations that human beings hold in common: the freedom to speak your mind, and choose your leaders; *the ability to access information, and worship how you please; confidence in the rule of law, and the equal administration of justice*. These are not impediments to stability, they are the cornerstones of stability. And we will always stand on the side of those who seek these rights.’ (emphasis added)

In reading Tsukishita’s letter, you will find that what he is asking of the U.S. President is “human dignity” and “the equal administration of justice” for the A-bomb survivors, the victims of indiscriminate mass killing carried out by the U.S. 64 years ago. Tsukishita also requests free access to information on the effects of radiation on A-bomb survivors which the U.S. still holds and refuses to disclose. He reminds us of the fact that the United States has neither apologized to, nor provided financial support for, the medical care of the hibakusha.

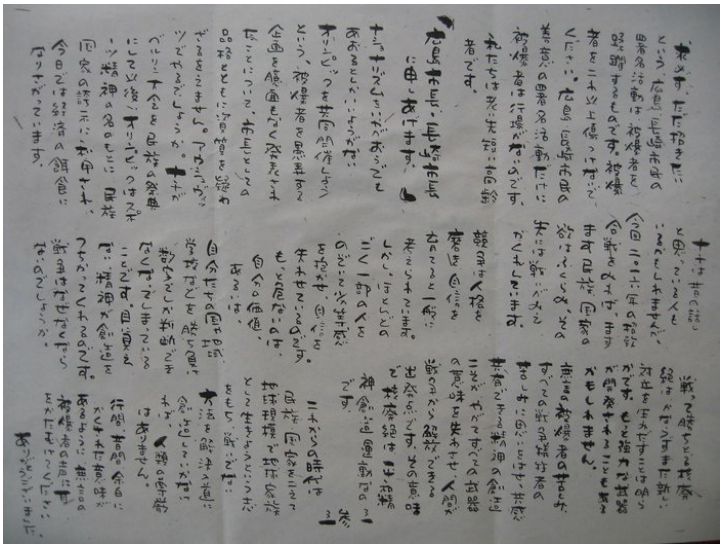
While in Tokyo, Obama expressed his interest in visiting Hiroshima and Nagasaki in the future. I sincerely hope that, before Obama visits Hiroshima and Nagasaki, he will recall his own words as mentioned above, and will fulfill his responsibility as U.S. President to respect A-bomb survivors’ human rights and human dignity. A repetition of a rhetorical and eloquent emphasis on human rights and human dignity alone will not bring about meaningful change to those whose lives have been irreparably altered. Obama needs to prove in a concrete manner his claim that supporting such fundamental values is the moral tradition ingrained in America.

At the same time, we Japanese also need to respect the human rights and human dignity of the vast number of people who became victims of the brutal and inhumane conduct of our own nation throughout the Asia-Pacific during the 15 year long war between 1931 and 1945. As Obama said, ‘the final area in which we must work together is in upholding the fundamental rights and dignity of all human beings.’ This applies to us all, regardless of nationality.

Yuki Tanaka

Dear Citizens of Hiroshima and Nagasaki,

I am a hibakusha, an A-Bomb survivor, and I live in a place called Yambaru in the north of the main island of Okinawa. I am an old man, trying to heal the pain of being irradiated by living amongst the myriad gods breathing in the mountains, rivers, grasses and trees of this island. In reading this letter, I would like you to understand and remember that I cannot claim my voice to be representative of all hibakusha, but I feel my message is an important one.



Tsukushita letter image

On August 6, 1945, the atomic bombing made many citizens of Hiroshima hibakusha, and three days later, the second atomic bombing also made many people of Nagasaki hibakusha. Sixty-four years have passed since then. Now, the majority of the citizens of Hiroshima and Nagasaki are not hibakusha as the hibakusha population is rapidly diminishing as it ages. Soon we hibakusha will all disappear from this world. For the last sixty-four years we have been desperately trying to survive, tormented by the haunting memory of an unforgettable experience: the indescribable agony of sudden death caused by the most atrocious and inhumane weapon ever produced in the history of mankind. Yet it is not only this memory that torments us. We live with the constant fear that the residual radiation embedded in our bodies may kill us unexpectedly, at any time. However, the pain of being an A-bomb survivor differs from person to person, and cannot be summarized in a few words under the general term “hibakusha.”

For my part, I must be honest and state that for some time after the war, I bitterly hated the U.S. and often reflected on how my life could have been different if the bombing had not occurred. Had I been able cry out, “You diabolical Americans!” it might have eased my anger a little. At a time when Japan was under the occupation of the Allied powers, such action was impossible. However, my feelings towards my situation have changed over the years.

We hibakusha are not intolerant. We have developed creative methods for survival as we have all struggled to overcome grave despair, to find hope and to understand the meaning of our lives. We therefore sincerely wish from the bottom of our hearts for peace and the total abolition of nuclear weapons. Nevertheless, we feel that our souls and bodies must first be healed before we can discuss the abolition of nuclear weapons. Please base your understanding of our situation on the fact that each hibakusha has his or her own distinctive pain. It is our honest belief that once we are healed and our pain is understood, we can then turn our attention to the movement to abolish nuclear weapons. I wonder whether I am alone in feeling that anti-nuclear movements have so far been promoted solely in the interest of politics without trying to disentangle the tangled threads of the deep and complex sorrow of each hibakusha.

Hiroshima and Nagasaki’s recent bid to host the 2016 Olympic Games is one incident which reflects the callous attitudes of those who exploit the symbolic

nature of these cities, ignoring the pain of the hibakusha. Another such reflection can be seen in the proposal that U.S. President Obama visit Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Many are keen for this to happen; I, on the other hand, would like him to first express his remorse for the atomic bombings on behalf of all Americans, the people responsible for spreading the fear of nuclear weapons worldwide and creating the hibakusha population.

I would like to ask the citizens of Hiroshima and Nagasaki to consider the following:

The leader of the United States, the nation that developed and used atomic bombs, is going to receive a Nobel Peace Prize, an award ironically established by the person who became a millionaire for his invention of smokeless gunpowder and dynamite. I am unsurprised, as this kind of celebration is an old ploy frequently exploited by people with money and power to deceive the public. I do, however, find it shocking that the anti-nuclear movement is collecting signatures from the citizens of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in an attempt to encourage President Obama to visit these cities. This situation is akin to that of the arsonist firefighter, who sets fire to a house, and is then the first to rush to save it. This push for President Obama to visit Hiroshima and Nagasaki is no different from inviting the arsonist to the scene of his crime without asking him to express any remorse or to pay compensation. Please do not hurt the hibakusha any further by pursuing such insulting projects. Though the anti-nuclear movement is promoting the collection of signatures as an *act of goodwill*, we find their cause very upsetting and feel we have nowhere to appeal. We are old and do not have much time left to us. Before President Obama is urged to visit the cities that his country destroyed, he must be asked to agree to pay all the hibakusha's medical expenses, living allowances and compensation for damages, and must also be requested to release all information collected by the Atomic Bomb Casualty Commission through its medical examinations of hibakusha. The ABCC operated for many years only for the purpose of collecting data on the effects of radiation on human bodies and never offered medical treatment to hibakusha.

I would like to convey to the mayors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki the following message:

I cannot help harboring deep doubts about your dignity and ability as mayors of your respective cities, given that both of you publicly and shamelessly promote Hiroshima and Nagasaki as potential hosts of the Olympic Games, an event which inevitably incites nationalism. Through this exploitation, you are making fools of the hibakusha. Do you think that the Olympic Games could be held at Auschwitz? Ever since the Nazis held the Olympic Games in Berlin as a grand festival to exult the Aryan race, they have been continually berated for exploiting the occasion and showing off their nation-state under the guise of sportsmanship. Do you wish the same criticism to be directed at your cities?

You may think that Nazi nationalism is a bygone matter that no longer has anything to do with our lives today. Yet the recent bidding to host the Olympic Games clearly revealed the ugly greed of all the candidates, and one could sense a war-like atmosphere behind the process. It is generally believed that competition cultivates personal character and gives individuals confidence, but in fact, competition actually gives most individuals, save a very small number, an inferiority complex that weakens their confidence. Moreover, competition can be a dangerous tool as it reduces the value of individuals, the value of a nation, city, school, to mere numerical figures: the outcome of the competition. We must not forget that spiritual power, which cannot be converted into numbers, cultivates humanity.

Why is it that we cannot eliminate war? Even if we could successfully abolish nuclear weapons, I am certain that we would not be able to avoid the occurrence of new conflicts. As a result, more destructive weapons could potentially be developed. Encouraging compassion on the other hand, enables one to extend one's imagination to the pain suffered by the hibakusha, as well as by all other war victims, and is essential in rendering all weapons meaningless. This is the starting point to freeing humankind from war. In this sense, the abolition of nuclear weapons should be a movement for the creation of the spirit of peace.

From now on, we, the people of the Earth, need to generate the strong will to live together as a global family, overcoming the barriers of race and nation, and together we must explore alternatives to war for the resolution of friction between peoples. There appears to be no other way for mankind to retain its dignity.

When reading any piece of writing, one must read between the lines to fully comprehend what it is that the author wishes to say. I ask you to listen to the voice of the voiceless hibakusha in a similar manner.

Thank you very much for reading my letter.

November 2009

Tsukishita Miki

(Edited and translated by Yuki Tanaka)

Yuki Tanaka is Research Professor, Hiroshima Peace Institute, and a coordinator of The Asia-Pacific Journal. He is the author most recently of Yuki Tanaka and Marilyn Young, eds., Bombing Civilians: A Twentieth Century History*. He wrote this article for The Asia-Pacific Journal.*

Recommended citation: Tsukishita Miki and Yuki Tanaka, "A Letter to the Citizens of Hiroshima and Nagasaki From a Hibakusha residing in Okinawa," The Asia-Pacific Journal, 47-2-09, November 23, 2009.

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