

What Nuclear Weapons Cannot Protect

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“Can nuclear weapons save the planet?” If someone had asked me this question a year ago, I would have answered "yes" but with some hesitation. First of all, I had never seriously thought about the possibility of nuclear weapons being used again anywhere. In addition, I had only read in textbooks about the damage caused by the nuclear weapons that fell on my country decades ago, when, as the textbook said, "On August 6, a nuclear weapon was dropped on Hiroshima, killing about 140,000 people, and on August 9, another nuclear weapon was dropped on Nagasaki, killing about 70,000 people." Of course, I felt some resentment that so many civilians had been killed by just two bombs and that people were still suffering from various radiation-related symptoms, but nuclear weapons were a thing of the past for me. Therefore, I understood that World War II ended after the use of two bombs, and due to the fact that some countries possess nuclear weapons, as the term "nuclear deterrence" suggests, there was a Cold War, but no armed conflict known as World War III has yet occurred. I also understood that peace in Japan was maintained in some way by the presence of the United States, a nuclear-armed country.

However, my perspective changed drastically when I visited the Nagasaki Atomic Bomb Museum. As I mentioned earlier, I did not know much about the damage caused by the atomic bombing, so the photos and objects on display, as well as the real voices and pictures of the *hibakusha*, atomic bomb survivors, were nothing short of shocking to me. It was the moment when “about 210,000 people killed by the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki," which had been just a number to me, took on real weight. 78 years ago, an atomic bomb was actually dropped here, and in an instant, every person who, like me, had lived with the belief that tomorrow would come, was killed. I was totally horrified by the sheer number of victims, by the deep grief of the *hibakusha* and their families and friends, by the fact that I had lived in the same country, Japan, without knowing it, and by the fact that a nuclear weapon could be used anywhere, and that I was now standing in a place where so much damage had been done.

With this vague fear in mind, I took a university course on nuclear weapons this year. In the lecture, I was exposed to the stories of many more Hiroshima and Nagasaki *hibakusha*. I will never forget the story of a *hibakusha* who said that even a beautiful sunset reminds him of the sky at the time of the atomic bombing. How painful and sad it is to remember that day,

day after day, when he and those around him were deeply wounded. I also learned the stories of the *hibakusha* of nuclear tests in many countries and the people who were forced to leave their homes because of the construction of test sites, as well as those who work in uranium mines, which I had never heard of before because my awareness was only that nuclear weapons = those dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The phrase "Japan is the only country that suffered from atomic bombing" is often used, and as a result, Japanese people tend to think that the damage caused by nuclear weapons is a story of the past around World War II, but there are still many people suffering from the damage caused by nuclear weapons.

“Can nuclear weapons save the planet?” If someone were to ask me today, I would answer "No." Nuclear weapons have taken many lives and deprived many people of their livelihoods on Earth. And even now, the invasion of Ukraine is taking place under the threat of nuclear weapons. Indirectly, nuclear weapons have taken the lives of many citizens and their peaceful daily activities. How can we say that these weapons save the planet?

The power of nuclear weapons is too excessive to be held for the sake of peace. In particular, modern nuclear weapons are said to be several to dozens of times more powerful than the nuclear weapons dropped on Nagasaki. Even if we think about it simply, it is impossible not to think about the time when these weapons, which can destroy the lives of tens of millions of people as well as animals and plants in an instant, will be used. There is also the fear of the unknown that I felt when I visited in Nagasaki. I was reminded of the discovery of genetic abnormalities in various creatures in the area around the Chernobyl nuclear power plant. Although Nagasaki is a city where many people live, I became concerned about whether there would really be no effects. We should prevent future generations from feeling the fear we feel now.

So how can we "save the planet"? Can we save the planet by getting rid of nuclear weapons? Unfortunately, it will not be that simple. Nuclear weapons are not the only reason there are only 90 seconds left on the Doomsday Clock. There are many problems on an international scale, such as climate change and the loss of social functions due to the spread of infectious diseases. In the midst of such a spreading international crisis, if nuclear weapons can be said to be a means of saving the planet, then a gradual reduction in the number of nuclear weapons would make the critical situation a little better.

What is it that tells us the true horror of nuclear bombs? It is not numbers in textbooks, nor scientific explanations, but the testimonies of the victims and visits to the actual sites where the atomic bombs fell. Now that I know this, I would never again say, "Nuclear weapons can save the planet."