

Choi Il Chul: Three-Fold Hardships of the Korean Hibakusha

My name is Choi Il Chul. I am the president of the Korea Atomic Bomb Casualty Association. Since atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, 54 years ago, more than half a century has passed.

In the present world, nuclear weapons, whose destructive power is incomparable with the three atomic bombs completed in 1945, have been stockpiled. Their destructive power is said to be equivalent to 1 million times that of the Hiroshima-Nagasaki type bombs.

Compared to the estimated damage from a nuclear war that can be caused by the present level of nuclear weapons, the A-bomb damage of Hiroshima and Nagasaki might be seen as very small. But what was that very small damage of the two cities actually like? I believe we have to face up to the real damage caused and to take a lesson from them to prevent another tragedy by deeply considering the consequences of a future nuclear war.

On August 6, 1945, I was a twelve-year-old 6th grader of a primary school. At that moment, I was at home, located 1.3 km from the epicenter. Fortunately, as I was inside the house and, I did not suffer the effects of strong heat rays. Though my house instantly collapsed by the blast, I was saved under the space of a piece of leaning furniture and did not suffer severe injuries.

When the black rain fell, I was inside a building in the suburbs where I took shelter, and I seemed to have escaped the effect of radioactivity contained in the rain. In my family, my older sister's husband was missing. My immediate older brother was caught by the bomb very close to the blast center and was found in an aid station. Three days after he was taken to the place of refuge, he died. My parents did not experience the A-bombing since they were already evacuated from the city. But they entered the city just after the bombing and looked for their families for several days. Because of that, both of them died soon after they came back to Korea.

According to a survey conducted by the Police Bureau of the then Ministry of Interior of Japan at the end of 1945, it was estimated that the number of Koreans victimized by the atomic bomb were 70,000 in Hiroshima and 30,000 in Nagasaki. Of a total of 100,000, 50,000 were killed by the bomb, and of the 50,000 survivors, 7,000 have remained in Japan, and about 43,000 returned to South Korea or North Korea.

Within five years after they returned, among 9,900 people with heavy injuries, 6,930 (70%) died. Also, 5,300 of the 16,500 with lighter injuries (32%), and 5,600 among 16,000 with no apparent injuries (35%) died. Sixty percent of the victims who returned to the homeland have died of diseases and in the Korean War. Now it is estimated that there are about 10,000 survivors in South Korea.



Choi Il Chul addresses the Hague Appeal for Peace Conference.
Photo: Lin Yi Hsing.

Now the registrants of our association total about 2,300. Every year, around 40 to 50 members die due to their old age, but it is offset by around the same number of survivors who newly register, obtaining the Hibakusha certificate in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. So our membership has not changed in the last four to five years.

We, the Hibakusha in South Korea, have been suffering from triple hardships.

First is the 36 years of colonial rule by the Japanese imperialists. Under the harsh oppression by the colonial rule, many people could not help leaving their homeland and going into exile. During the Second World War, the Korean people were forced to pledge their loyalty to the Japanese emperor and were brought to Japan for forced labor. As a result, those who lived in Hiroshima and Nagasaki or who were brought there for forced labor fell victim to the A-bombing.

Second, after the end of the war, the prevailing historical perception in South Korea has been that the A-bombings brought liberation and independence to the homeland. Due to the difficulty of receiving sympathy from the public, the A-bomb survivors have been left abandoned in the society, which expresses no interest in our plight.

Third, in 1957, the Atomic Bomb Medical Treatment Law was enacted in Japan, which made it possible for the sufferers to receive treatment. But this law was not applied to the Korean victims, and we have been left without any care and attention.

The worst error of Japan in the post-war days is that Japan has not made honest apology or given effective compensation to the victims for its aggression and atrocities in South Korea and other Asian countries.

The damage we, the A-bomb victims in Korea, have suffered is the damage Japan inflicted on us during its colonial rule and the war of aggression. Japan bears a responsibility to make an apology and to repair the damage it caused. The State of Japan as a whole must take this post-war responsibility. Whatever form of state compensation, therefore, it should be provided to us. The Hibakusha Aid Law enacted in Japan in 1994 does not have any provisions to distinguish the sufferers by nationality or residential conditions. So this law must be applied to the survivors living abroad.

To achieve this, in solidarity with citizens' groups in Japan, we are developing the citizens' movement and carrying on a court struggle for war compensation from Japan and the application of the Aid Law to A-bomb survivors living in South Korea.

As I told you before, the atomic bombs used against Hiroshima and Nagasaki had a yield of 20kt (TNT), which was very small compared with that of currently stockpiled nuclear arms. Even these small bombs burned all living things to death, destroyed everything, and instantly reduced the two cities to ashes with heat rays of several thousand degrees Celsius, enormous blast waves, and lethal radiation.

The destructive power of the current H-bombs is in the megaton class. Once a war starts, all individuals or states will completely lose their rational senses. It is, therefore, hard to foresee when a next nuclear war would break out.

If a nuclear war breaks out in the future, I am sure it would lead the whole human race to annihilation, and the earth would see its last day. As long as nuclear weapons exist on earth, world peace will not be ensured.

In concluding my presentation, I would like to wish you good health and success in your work and to pray for the abolition of nuclear weapons and world peace. Thank you very much.

Choi Il Chul is the President of the Korea Atomic Bomb Casualty Association.