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The Hibakusha Voice and the Future of the Anti-Nuclear Movement

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Mr. Tsuboi Sunao would appear to be an ordinary healthy elderly Japanese man except for the large patch of white skin that medical specialists call leucoderma on his forehead. He is a cheerful 79 year old, but over the past 60 years he has been critically ill four times, each time being told that he would not survive. He first fell ill immediately after the bombing of Hiroshima when he was unconscious for 40 days. He is presently suffering from prostate cancer. Despite his illness he has been and still is an active campaigner against nuclear arms and one of the best known hibakusha, or victims of the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In December 2003 he went to Washington D.C., to protest against the permanent display of the "Enola Gay" in the new wing of the Smithsonian Air and Space Museum. He was not against the actual display of the B-29 bomber that dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima, killing 140,000 people by the end of 1945. Rather he was against the exhibition of this plane without any explanation of the consequences caused as a result of the attack that took so many civilian lives and left tens of thousands of others to suffer throughout their lives.

Mr. Tsuboi does not expect to be alive when Hiroshima City commemorates the 70th anniversary of the atomic attack in 2015. Indeed, it is almost certain that not only Mr. Tsuboi, but also most hibakusha will have passed away by then, as approximately 5000 hibakusha have died every year over the past ten years. Due to the rapidly diminishing number of hibakusha the "weathering of the Hiroshima experience" as it is called in Japan has become a serious concern for many citizens of this city in recent years. The number of children from various parts of Japan who visit the Atomic Bomb Museum in Peace Park on school excursions has also decreased sharply in recent years so that "oblivion to the Hiroshima memory" is becoming a nation wide phenomenon.

In one corner of the Hiroshima Peace Park stands the statue of a young girl, Sadako, stretching her arms towards the sky. Sadako's story is well known throughout the world, as books in many languages have been published about this girl who died of leukemia at the age of 12 in 1955, ten years after the bombing of Hiroshima. While ill in hospital Sadako attempted to make one thousand folded paper cranes, working on these until shortly before her death, in the belief that she would survive if she could achieve her goal. As a result of her efforts, the paper crane became a symbol of peace in Japan. Since her death visiting school groups from all over Japan have placed thousands of strings of paper cranes around her statue in memory of her lost youth and the Hiroshima tragedy. Sadly, over the past few years, these paper cranes have been set on fire a number of times, probably by young people, "just for fun." To prevent such juvenile crime the city council built a small glass enclosure behind the statue in which to protect the paper cranes. Security cameras were also installed. Yet again, a few days before August 6, Hiroshima Day, in 2003, a university student from Kobe broke the glass and set fire to the cranes. When arrested he confessed that he did it out of frustration over the grim employment situation facing new university graduates. The incidents suggest that Sadako's sorrowful tale, and the plight of the living as well as dead atomic victims, has become irrelevant to many young people in Japan.

Today, Japan's experience as the only nation to encounter a nuclear holocaust also appears irrelevant to Japan's leading politicians including Prime Minister Koizumi. Until Mr. Koizumi became prime minister five years ago, it was an annual tradition for the prime minister to meet representatives of the hibakusha for about half an hour immediately after attending the commemoration ceremony in Peace Park on August 6. It was, of course, merely a token gesture for previous successive prime ministers to make a show of government concern for the health of hibakusha. Yet even this publicity gesture was cancelled, although Mr. Koizumi still reluctantly attends the ceremony. Some of his colleagues in the Liberal Democratic Party, including former Party Secretary General Abe Shinzo, think that Japan should develop nuclear arms for defense purposes against so-called "rogue nations" such as North Korea. Until a decade or so ago, there were still a few prominent conservative politicians who tenaciously objected to the nuclearization of Japan and to the dispatch of Japan's Self Defense Forces to overseas war zones. Today, such statesmen no longer exist within the LDP. Article 9 of Japan's post-war Constitution forbidding engagement in any form of armed conflict has so far been widely supported by the Japanese people, partly because of a strong desire not to repeat the nuclear holocaust. Recently, however, powerful voices both within the LDP as well as opposition parties have called for elimination of the pacifist clauses of the Constitution.

For many months now major Japanese anti-nuclear organizations and other grass-roots peace movement groups have been planning their own events scheduled for August 2005 to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Yet these planned events seem to offer few new ideas of how to tackle the problem of "oblivion to the Hiroshima memory" that pervades both the younger generation as well as the politicians. It is almost certain that events to commemorate the 60th anniversary will be the last chance for surviving hibakusha to appeal to the world to oppose the idea of genocide by weapons of mass destruction. I am sure that, in August 2005, they will receive much media attention from all over the world. However, the real question that the Japanese people should ask themselves is what they will do after the 60th anniversary in order to keep alive the Hiroshima memory and to utilize it to construct a peaceful world without the living voices of the hibakusha.

A Hiroshima A-Bomb victim, Ms. Kurihara Sadako, once wrote the following passage in one of her poems:

It was night in the basement of a broken building
Victims of the atomic bomb
Crowded into the candleless darkness

Filling the room to overflowing
The smell of fresh blood, the stench of death
The stuffiness of human sweat, the writhing moans
When, out of the darkness, came a wondrous voice
"Oh! The baby's coming!" it said

.....
And so, a new life was born
In the darkness of that living hell
.....
We shall give forth new life!
We shall bring forth new life!
Even to our death

What is urgently required for Japan's peace movement now is a powerful cry for new life to its own ideas of peace with new perspectives in order to confront the present world of military violence and terrorism.

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