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Roche/Hiroshima

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By Douglas Roche

At 8.15 on the fateful morning of August 6, 1945, as World War II was drawing to a close in the Pacific, an American atomic bomb exploded 580 metres above the heart of Hiroshima, Japan. Thermal rays emanating from a gigantic fireball charred every human being in a two-kilometre circle. Old and young, male and female, soldier and civilian — the killing was utterly indiscriminate and, in the end, 140,000 people were dead. Three days later, similar atomic carnage obliterated Nagasaki.

That was the beginning of the nuclear age, 75 years ago.

I was sixteen at the time, and I remember sitting at the kitchen table, listening to the radio news about “a new kind of bomb.” The destruction was so massive that government officials were predicting the war in the Pacific would be over in a matter of days. My parents sighed with relief: I would be spared having to go to war.

The Japanese people who survived the atomic attacks are called *hibakusha*, and soon there will be no one left on earth with direct memory of the horror of mass destruction. Hiroshima and Nagasaki will be but history.

But they are not history for me. With 13,400 nuclear weapons possessed today by nine countries, they are a living reality. The U.N.’s top official on disarmament affairs, Izumi Nakamitsu, visited Ottawa recently and said that the risk of use of nuclear weapons deliberately, by accident or through miscalculation “is higher than it has been in decades.”

The contrast between nuclear realities and aspirations is stunning. Arms control and disarmament treaties, painstakingly constructed over many years, are crumbling. All the nuclear weapons states are modernizing their arsenals. The three major states on the U.N. Security Council, the U.S., Russia and China, are the very ones ratcheting up tensions.

On the other hand, the International Court of Justice has ruled that states have an obligation to conclude negotiations leading to nuclear disarmament. Pope Francis and many other spiritual leaders have condemned the possession of nuclear weapons. A new Prohibition Treaty, signed by 122 states, outlaws them.

Yet the nuclear states spent \$72.9 billion last year on nuclear weapons (the U.S. spent more than the next eight states combined). Not even the ravages of COVID-19, painfully illustrating the need for huge sums of money to be re-directed to health needs, has deterred the nuclear planners. And the political leaders appear impotent against the demands of the military-industrial complex for more weapons of mass destruction.

Seventy-five years after Hiroshima and Nagasaki, we have to ask ourselves: Is the long-sought goal of the abolition of nuclear weapons but a dream? This is a question that haunts me.

In the early years of my life, I never thought about nuclear weapons, except perhaps around the time of the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis. But as a young parliamentarian in the 1970s, I visited Hiroshima and Nagasaki and talked to the *hibakusha* and saw the horrors depicted so vividly in the museums. It hit me forcibly that continued spending on these instruments of death was directly stealing from the poor of the world whose security depends not on weaponry but food, health, housing and education.

I started campaigning for nuclear disarmament in order to expedite the development processes. The United Nations became a second home for me as I

struggled with the political machinations that have contorted security to mean that I am safer if I am able to bomb you out of existence.

I have approached the problem of abolition as a parliamentarian, diplomat and civil society activist. Why can there not be a time-bound program of mutual and verifiable nuclear disarmament? The models exist. Secretaries-General of the U.N. have repeatedly called for progress. Is not the logic of abolition overpowering?

The answer to the elusive question of abolition lies in the power nuclear weapons give their possessors. Abolition can only be achieved by slowly convincing the powerful that their security will be enhanced as they gradually reduce their stocks to zero.

Obviously, international confidence must be built at every successive step along the way. This is an area where Canada could shine in fostering a new international dialogue. But to do this, we would have to care enough about Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The *hibakusha* have never given up their call for abolition. And neither will I.

Former Senator Douglas Roche was Canada's Ambassador for Disarmament 1984-89. In 2010, he was made an Honorary Citizen of Hiroshima for his work in nuclear disarmament.

