Statement on Nihon Hidankyo by Kathleen Sullivan for the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists
October, 11, 2024

What's most remarkable about the work by the Nihon Hidankyo organization?

In the early postwar decades, Hidankyo was started as a means to support atomic bomb survivors from Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Hibakusha worked tirelessly together to advocate for their rights and for medical assistance in Japan. What is most remarkable about Hidankyo is their mission to share hibakusha testimony so that people understand what happens in an atomic hellfire. Although sharing their firsthand witness is not easy and doesn't become easier overtime or with practice, hibakusha risk their personal comfort to relay these excruciating memories in order for people to try and understand the unspeakable consequences of nuclear weapons — the ultimate instruments of ominicide.

Over 10 years, Youth Arts New York/Hibakusha Stories hosted more than 100 atomic bomb survivors to share their testimony with some 50,000 youth, primarily in the New York Metro Area. Many of these survivors were members of Hidankyo. Upon hearing the first hand witness from Hiroshima and Nagasaki students were visibly moved. One student shared: "I never really thought about how badly people were hurt from this one atomic bomb. After their visit I now have a more sensitive feeling towards others emotions and stories. It really opened my eyes to what can happen if history repeats itself." Another said: "They were able to tell their stories to us and inspire us to want to live in a nuclear free country. I loved how brave they were and how willing they were to teach us. Now we know how dangerous nuclear weapons are. I am honored to be trusted with their stories." And another student remarked: "It helped me understand that even through war, there are just some boundaries that people shouldn't cross."

Why is it important?

Next year will mark the 80th anniversary of the atomic massacres in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Many people fear for the fate of our world while the firsthand witness of those who live with their own memories of August 1945 will soon be gone. When they are gone, who will share their testimony? The Nobel Committee's choice to honor Hidankyo is so important in the world right now because it seems there's a collective amnesia about the threat of nuclear weapon use by accident or by design. Currently, all nuclear armed states are modernizing their arsenals. Heightened nuclear risks today are not only about the threat of use, but the risk of accidental use also exists wherever nuclear weapons exist. Nuclear weapons are tethered to earth by fallible human beings and the machines that we have made, which will eventually fail. Nuclear weapons threaten everything and everyone we love, every moment of every day.

What does this recognition mean for the Hibakusha community?

Atomic bomb survivors have suffered in ways most people cannot begin to comprehend. Being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize means that the sacrifices they have made in sharing their

painful memories have not been in vain. It means that the hundreds of thousands of people who perished in August 1945, and the thousands more who have died in the interim from radiation related disease have not been forgotten. This most important global recognition will widen the reach of hibakusha testimony and inspire others to join the movement for nuclear abolition.

Why getting the prize now?

The Nobel Committee clearly recognizes the precarious state of disarmament affairs across the globe. All nuclear armed states are spending billions on modernizing nuclear weapons. Many nuclear armed states are currently threatening to use nuclear weapons in war. How many times has Vladimir Putin warned the West that he is prepared to use nuclear weapons in his war with Ukraine? How many times did Donald Trump threaten to use nuclear weapons or boast about the size of his button? We have a path forward through the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. Nuclear armed states and nuclear dependent states should join the treaty to safeguard the future of our planet.

More broadly, what does this mean for the nuclear disarmament movement after ICAN got the same prize in 2017?

Youth Arts New York/Hibakusha Stories is a member of the ICAN campaign. When we won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2017, it is for our efforts to usher in the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons — a new instrument of international law that flipped the narrative from the doctrine of deterrence to a focus on the humanitarian and environmental consequences of nuclear weapons use as well as their development, production and threat of use. This Nobel Peace Prize, like ICAN's in 2017, will further stigmatize nuclear armed and nuclear adjacent countries, it will hopefully encourage them to step back from the brink, and it will definitely reenergize the global movement for nuclear abolition. As Hiroshima survivor Setsuko Thurlow said, when she received the Nobel Peace Prize on behalf of ICAN in 2017: "When I was a 13-year-old girl, trapped in the smoldering rubble, I kept pushing. I kept moving toward the light. And I survived. Our light now is the ban treaty. To all in this hall and all listening around the world, I repeat those words that I heard called to me in the ruins of Hiroshima: "Don't give up! Keep pushing! See the light? Crawl towards it."

Dr. Kathleen Sullivan
Director
Hibakusha Stories
www.hibakushastories.org