

Akira Kawasaki's remarks at the Roundtable for the Formation of the International People's Tribunal Organizing Committee: Towards Holding the US Accountable for the Atomic Bombings
7 June 2024, Hiroshima

I would like to express my warmest gratitude to the organizers for holding such an important event and for giving me the opportunity to speak.

This initiative of the People's Tribunal to hold the US accountable for the atomic bombing in August 1945 has much in common with Peace Boat's efforts to share the message of the Hibakusha of Hiroshima and Nagasaki with the world and with ICAN's global movement to universalize the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW). At the same time, I observe some challenges in this initiative from a campaigning strategy perspective. My points today are made not from an academic or legal perspective but from a political and social perspective.

The first question is how to address the responsibility of the Japanese government. The People's Tribunal is mainly focusing on the US responsibility for the atomic bombing. But what about Japan?

Since the 1950s, the Japanese Hibakusha movement has consistently called for national legal reparations for the Hibakusha from the Japanese government. This is based on the recognition that the Japanese government's aggression made it ultimately responsible for the war. As victims of this war, Hibakusha have been demanding national reparations from the government. However, this demand has not been met. In Japan, several measures to assist the Hibakusha are in place, such as medical treatment and various allowances. But these are not legal reparations; they are all social services. This is all that the Japanese government provides. For Hibakusha, this attitude is unacceptable, and they are still calling for national reparations. Furthermore, Korean Hibakusha are not only the victims of the US atomic bombing but also the victims of Japan's colonization of the Korean Peninsula. I would like to urge the organizers to consider once again how the People's Tribunal deals with the responsibility of the Japanese government.

As a campaign strategy, it is possible to set aside Japan's responsibility and to solely focus on the US's responsibility. Such a campaign might be welcomed by the Japanese public. However, taking this approach risks spreading the misconception that Japan was solely a victim of World War II and promoting Japanese nationalism in a negative way. I see it as a risk. Such Japanese nationalism would be counterproductive to our common efforts to ensure that war is never repeated in Asia. In any case, Japanese Hibakusha and Korean Hibakusha are equally the victims of the US atomic bombing. Therefore I would urge the Korean Hibakusha to closely consult with Japanese Hibakusha organizations when proceeding with the project of the People's Tribunal.

The second issue is the relationship between tackling the illegality of the atomic bombing in 1945 and promoting nuclear disarmament today. Recognizing the criminality of the atomic bombing helps challenge nuclear deterrence today, for sure. But at the same time, we should be mindful that some people see the atomic bombing as somehow inevitable in the 1945 context but think that nuclear weapons today are unnecessary and dangerous, and

thus must be abolished. We see those people within the US elites, for example. The question is whether we see those people as allies of our nuclear disarmament campaign or whether they need convincing.

When Barack Obama came to Hiroshima eight years ago, as the first US President to visit the city, there was a serious debate about whether or not Hiroshima should demand an apology. This was a very complicated debate with divergent views and mixed emotions. In the end, Hiroshima did not officially demand an apology, nor did President Obama offer one. Still, even the fact that the US President came to Hiroshima and spoke of the goal of a nuclear-weapon-free world can be evaluated positively. This is a majority view, as far as I understand. At the same time, not a small number of people, including Hibakusha, were hoping for an apology if it was not directly asked for.

When the People's Tribunal movement calls for an apology from the US, it should also consider how to deal with the varied and complex public opinions of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the cities that suffered from the atomic bombing.

The third question relates to the TPNW that entered into force in 2021. The treaty has a provision for the assistance of victims of the use and testing of nuclear weapons. Discussions are underway towards the third Meeting of States Parties to the treaty, to be held next March, for the creation of an international trust fund for victim assistance and environmental remediation. The treaty's provision of victim assistance states that, if nuclear victims are living in a country that is a party to the treaty, the government of said country would be primarily responsible for providing them with assistance. A mechanism of international cooperation will be created to support each government. If the Republic of Korea joined the treaty, the ROK government would be legally responsible for assisting the Hibakusha living in Korea.

One can question why the treaty is not asking the very countries that used or tested nuclear weapons to make reparation for the victims. But it is important to understand that the TPNW's approach is more practical and realistic in how to provide support for the victims. The countries that used or tested nuclear weapons are not actively joining the treaty. But we should not wait for them to change their minds and join the treaty before starting to support the victims. Victims need assistance now, so we need to start supporting them and the international community should cooperate to make that possible. And then we can engage the countries that used or tested nuclear weapons in such an international cooperation mechanism. This is the approach that the TPNW is taking. Hibakusha and nuclear test victims are all aging. Practical measures to save them are being taken now, and international expectations are rising. The People's Tribunal to demand reparations from the US is encouraged to examine carefully how it can relate to such ongoing efforts under the TPNW for the sake of victims.

Thank you for your attention.