

Voices of the Hibakusha: Event for the Anniversary of the Nuclear Ban Treaty and “Every Second Counts for the Survivors!”

On July 7, more than 200 people watched a livestream dedicated to the Hibakusha (A-bomb survivors) and disarmament advocacy. It marked four years since the adoption of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) and looked back on the first half of “Every Second Counts for the Survivors! – Peace Boat Online Hibakusha Project”. The host of the event was Peace Boat International Coordinator, Watanabe Rika who opened the stream with joy and hope as she delightfully greeted the viewers and encouraged them to participate with comments and questions in the YouTube Live Chat. She gave a brief introduction to Peace Boat’s 37-year history and emphasized that a major part of the organization’s work is, “to create a world without nuclear weapons”. Peace Boat has been inviting Hibakusha to join global voyages to share their testimonies around the world through the ‘Global Voyage for a Nuclear Free World: Peace Boat Hibakusha Project’ in collaboration with the survivors themselves. So far, Hibakusha testimony sessions have been held in over 100 cities in 60 countries, mainly through Peace Boat’s global voyages.



Kawasaki Akira, Director of the Hibakusha Project and International Steering Group member of the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN), was the first guest to speak during the event. He thanked everyone for coming to the livestream on the same day as Tanabata or Japanese “Star Festival”, when children write wishes and tie them to bamboo trees). “Today is a special day”, he said, “On July 7, four years ago, the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons was adopted at the United Nations by votes in favor from 122 countries.” Mr Kawasaki explained about the treaty, particularly that it recognizes that nuclear weapons are inhumane and the suffering of survivors. He emphasized the connection between survivors’ testimonies, from Hiroshima and Nagasaki, as well as from nuclear testing around the world and the TPNW. Currently, 54 countries have ratified this treaty and Peace Boat and other organizations are working to increase the number of participating nations.

Sharing the testimonies of the Hibakusha all over the world is something that Peace Boat has been doing for many years, but due to the uncertainties of COVID-19, testimony sessions have taken place during online events for the past year and a half. Through online platforms

for their stories, the Peace Boat Hibakusha Project continues to advocate with the Hibakusha and strive for a future of peace and disarmament. Ms Watanabe introduced “[Every Second Counts for Survivors: ~Peace Boat Hibakusha Online Project](#)” which was launched in October 2020. In 2017, the TPNW was adopted by the UN and ICAN received the Nobel Peace Prize for their work towards this. Unfortunately, since then, as Ms Watanabe explained more Hibakusha have passed away, but the world was able to hear their personal testimonies. With the Hibakusha now at an advanced age, there are fewer opportunities to hear directly from them, a key reason why the Hibakusha Project transitioned to an online platform. There have been 34 testimony sessions online, 25 host countries/regions, and 2,364 total participants to date.



The next guest was Higashino Mariko, a second-generation Hibakusha from Hiroshima who has told her story in many places, including through online testimony sessions in Mongolia, India and the Netherlands. When Ms Higashino’s mother was 17 years old, she was exposed to the atomic bomb along with her grandmother, who was a chief nurse at a military hospital. When asked about when she spoke for students at Leiden University in the Netherlands about her family’s story, Ms Higashino said she was moved by the students’ reactions and gratitude for her testimony. She was very delighted that there were so many young participants, and was deeply grateful for all their questions, speaking from their hearts as she did. Ms Higashino said she left the presentation feeling hopeful for the future generation.

“World peace is not somewhere far away, but rather, it is something that each of us creates, and I think that coming from the heart is important. I have planted the seeds of peace in the hearts of everyone who heard me. Please take good care of yourselves and make a huge flower of peace bloom.” Ms Higashino said.

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Wada Masako, a leading member of the Japan Confederation of A- and H- bomb survivors, Nihon Hidankyo spoke about an online event which has been held for people in Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikstan, in April 2021 which also marked the 30th anniversary of the closure of the Semei Nuclear Test Site in Kazakhstan. Noting that because Kyrgyzstan cannot be visited with Peace Boat by sea, Ms Wada said she was glad that this kind of event could be held despite the pause on Peace Boat’s voyages.



Hiroshima survivor, Miyake Nobuo next joined, together with Wayne Kijner in Fiji, and Japanese-English interpreter, Michi Yoshikawa. Mr Kijner is from the Marshall Islands and attending university in Fiji and where he is the President of, ‘MISA [Marshall Islands Students’ Association]’. He explained that “MISA is a student organization, basically a grassroots movement to raise awareness among our peers and colleagues at the university to teach them about nuclear testing in the Marshall Islands. Every year since March 1, 2019, we have been hosting an on-campus student-led march, which allows us and students around the region to learn about nuclear testing. We were very honored to have Mr Miyake share a video testimony, showing solidarity in that we are not alone. Thank you Mr Miyake, for your support, always.”

Reflecting on the online testimony session held in April as part of “Every Second Counts for the Survivors”, Mr Kijiner said “When Mr. Miyake spoke about Hiroshima in 1945, his testimony really resonated with us because it was something very familiar for us Marshallese students. His stories reminded us of our elders, survivors back in the Marshall Islands, and it was very humbling to hear his story. Now we have something to share along with our stories, and we can add on more and keep this going in the future. I strongly believe that learning from the past can help us build a better future to avoid making the same mistake over again. Mr. Miyake’s testimony sharing in that event really captured what we were sharing with others as well.”

A screenshot from Mr Miyake’s online event with Fijian students was displayed during the livestream, with the caption, “We Are Not Alone”. Mr Miyake was 16 years old when the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, and over 140,000 people lost their lives. At the time, there was little media exposure about the impact of the bomb. In 1954, the US conducted a hydrogen bomb test in Bikini Atoll, and Japanese tuna fishing vessels happened to be near the testing site. This was a key moment to bring together Hibakusha who had previously remained silent and raise their voices, urging the government to compensate them while calling for a worldwide movement to abolish nuclear weapons with the founding of the Nihon Hidankyo. He called on everyone around the world, especially young people, to advocate for a world without nuclear weapons and work together towards world peace.



The next virtual stop during the event was Germany, where Ms Watanabe spoke with Kunimoto Takashi, and Frauke Arndt who met during the first Global Voyage for a Nuclear Free World when Mr Kunimoto made the documentary, “Traveling with Hibakusha: Across Generations” (2010). Answering a question about how social issues were tackled in Germany compared to Japan through education, in society, Mr Kunimoto responded, “What I think changes day by day, and I think each individual has a different way of thinking about such efforts like the ones towards education. Even if I come as an immigrant, I feel that I have become a parent from that moment. For example, there are good and bad things from the memories of war, and there are quite a few expectations for these countries. The names of the Jewish families who were born and killed, and traces of Auschwitz Concentration Camp are still around as memorials. Japan does something similar, with memorial halls with

dedicated private events up in Nagano prefecture.” He said he had noticed one difference in Germany where the teachers enthusiastically confront the histories with war, and students have mandatory trips to museums and historical sites to be reminded of why this history should not be repeated. These lessons also extend beyond history class, and literature is also used to convey messages from survivors. Ms Arndt speaking about an online event that was held as part of Every Second Counts said, “Young people nowadays have a chance to hear a lot about war and the past, but the Hibakusha experience gives them a chance to show their empathy. The online event was a valuable opportunity for everyone to talk to each other directly.”



After “departing” from Germany, Ms Watanabe said ‘hola’ to Latin America where she spoke with Agustin Saiz, Nuclear Issues Coordinator at the NGO, Our Voice in Argentina, Miyata Takeshi, a Hibakusha living in Nagasaki, and Imai Yuko, a Spanish-Japanese interpreter. Mr Saiz said that the ‘Our Voice’ is grateful to survivors and the opportunity to hear from them. “We were working on nuclear disarmament from an environmental point of view but after hearing Mr Miyata’s testimony, we have incorporated a humanitarian element. Currently, we are working with countries such as Uruguay, Argentina, Paraguay, and even Italy.” Talking about his impression after hearing Mr Miyata’s testimony, he continued, “After hearing Mr. Miyata’s testimony, we have finally realized that disarmament is a matter of responsibility for all citizens on this planet, regardless of whether they are in Japan, Europe, the United States, or South America. We understand that to bring true justice, it is necessary to talk about what happened in Nagasaki and Hiroshima, especially because the lack of justice [for the Hibakusha] 75 years ago is the root of injustices today.”

Mr Miyata expressed his gratitude for his Argentinean audience during his online testimony session. He said he was moved to be able to share his testimony with people on the other side of the world and said “The Earth is such a small planet, if an atomic bomb was used, the results would be catastrophic, and it was important for me to share this common understanding with people in Argentina”. He continued to reiterate what Ms Watanabe had said about the TPNW, “The voices of Hibakusha survivors became a treaty for the world, and the world supported it. Not only in Nagasaki, or in Hiroshima, but people all over the world want to enjoy

living on this green Earth free of the threat of nuclear weapons and can continue living here together. This treaty is like a bible that will guide us on our path to achieving this goal.”



Christelle Barakat, a university student from Lebanon living in the US and an intern at Peace Boat-US joined the event to share her experiences of spreading Hibakusha voices with the help of Michi Yoshikawa, the Japanese-English interpreter. She shared her thoughts about the testimony session held last December, and its impact on her work with the Youth Champions for Disarmament. Ms Barakat hosted one event herself at her university. “It was truly, extremely, impactful. Every single time I hear a Hibakusha talking with us, I get deeply moved because there’s this raw sincerity, there’s this strength and courage when they relay their experiences to us. I’m always amazed by their strength to be able to share something that’s so horrifying and so deeply intimate. In our schools, we learn about the world wars and about how the atomic bombings happened, but we don’t really go into details about them. This is both true with the students back in my home country, Lebanon, and also the United States. I personally always believe that it’s much more impactful listening to someone who has been through something rather than simply reading about it. It makes it more real. It isn’t just something that happened in history. This is something real that impacted people and still impacts them today. As a Youth Champion for Disarmament, listening to the Hibakusha gives me hope and strength to keep fighting and working for disarmament.” After Ms Barakat organized the virtual event on her campus and joined another Youth Champion, she was so moved that she decided to join Peace Boat US as an intern along with other endeavors towards promoting disarmament. After the first session in April, all of the faculty, staff, and students were so deeply moved that they wanted to host another Hibakusha event so Ms Barakat is now working towards hosting another testimony session for Hibakusha. She believes that ‘International Week’ at her university will be the perfect opportunity to host another event in collaboration with the Weatherspoon Museum, which is holding an exhibition on Japanese art. She hopes to host an in-person workshop to make paper cranes for peace to complement her event.



The last international stop was the Philippines, where Ms Watanabe spoke with Loreta Castro, who will host an online testimony session on August 23 in which students, teachers, and partnering peace and interfaith organizations will also participate. She hopes that the audience will know more about the experiences and the advocacy work of the Hibakusha, and that this can inspire them to pursue disarmament advocacy in Asia.

Ms Watanabe played a video montage of Hibakusha survivors and international Hibakusha supporters expressing why sharing their testimonies is so important.

[When the TPNW was adopted] "I was so happy that I jumped up and down and cried!"

— Terumi Tanaka

"When I learned of [the adoption of the TPNW] in the middle of the night, the faces of the many senior Hibakusha leaders who had died came to mind, one after another, and I wept alone."

— Koji Ueda

We have to show the world the horror of nuclear weapons." — Michiko Hattori



Ms Watanabe concluded the event talking to guests who were in Japan. She spoke with Ankita Sehgal (Tokyo), Jun McInerney (Yokohama), and Momoko Takao (Osaka). For Ms Takao, her experience with studying international affairs in university motivated her work with Hibakusha. She spent a year abroad in Hawaii and met people from different countries, and when she returned, she wanted to know how she could contribute to peacebuilding. If the Hibakusha could use their voices to make a strong impact, what could the youth of Japan do? As for Ms Sehgal, after earning her Masters Degree in International Peace Studies from Soka University, she joined Peace Boat as an intern to work specifically on “Every Second Counts for the Survivors!- Peace Boat Hibakusha Project Online”. She aims to prevent a “Hibakusha 2.0” in India, as there are currently 150 nuclear warheads. Ms Sehgal has organized seven events surrounding Hibakusha testimonies and the story of Sadako. “I realized that the pain of the atomic bomb survivors is incomparable and beyond comprehension. However, younger generations can take significant action to protect others from experiencing similar suffering in the future, taking personal responsibility to alert others that nuclear weapons still exist and pose a constant threat to all of our lives.” Dr Ikeda Daisaku, Ms Sehgal’s mentor, is her main source of inspiration for utilizing the role of younger generations to advocate with the Hibakusha until the last person feels safe to live in a nuclear-free world. Mr McInerney’s experience started in Australia, where he learned about the intersection between peace and identity as someone who is both Japanese and Australian.



Lastly, Watanabe greeted Yamamoto Naomi, based in Osaka, and Yuko Imai. Ms Yamamoto said “Each time I interpret for these events, I am always so moved by the testimonies, and the young people who smile and are willing to participate.” Although these events are now online instead of face-to-face, Naomi says that the events still connect everyone together and uplift them as well. For Ms Imai, Mr Miyata is around the same age as her parents, and her father would also be impressed by the way she would help the Hibakusha tell their stories in Spanish.

Ms Watanabe closed the event and thanked everyone for participating. As of April 27th, 2021, there have been 34 testimonies, 25 hosting countries/regions, and 2,364 total participants. The YouTube live chat was also brimming with positivity, with messages of peace and hope in different languages.

On August 6th, there will be a musical performance with two of the instruments that survived the atomic bom Farrah Hasnain bing in Hiroshima: a piano and a violin.