



Hiroshima and Nagasaki

More than a quarter of a million people were killed when the United States dropped two relatively small nuclear bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945 – the first and only use of nuclear weapons in war.

Many were instantly incinerated. Others died in agony hours, days or weeks after the attacks from severe burns, blast injuries and acute radiation sickness. Countless more died years later from radiation-related cancers and other illnesses.

To prevent a recurrence of such atrocities, nations must act with urgency to eliminate nuclear weapons.

In Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the scenes of devastation were apocalyptic: Schoolyards scattered with dead and dying children. Mothers cradling their lifeless babies. People with their intestines hanging out and strips of skin dangling from their limbs.

Most victims died without any care to ease their suffering, as few hospitals remained standing, medical supplies had been destroyed, and most doctors and nurses had been killed or injured. Those who entered the cities in the aftermath to render assistance risked their own lives because of residual radiation.

Ground zero

In each city, those closest to ground zero – known as the hypocentre of the explosion – stood little chance of survival. Almost everyone within a radius of 1.2 kilometres and unshielded from the bomb's effects died instantly or within a few weeks.

Ground temperatures at the hypocentre reached 3,000 to 4,000 degrees Celsius, with people as far away as 3.5 kilometres suffering burns. Powerful shock waves destroyed most wooden structures within 2 kilometres.

Even at a distance of 1 kilometre, people received a high enough dose of ionising radiation to die from acute radiation poisoning. Many people much further away also died from the delayed effects of radiation exposure.

The vast majority of the victims – over 90 per cent – were civilians, including an estimated 38,000 children. At the time of the attack on Hiroshima, approximately 8,400 junior high school students were outdoors creating firebreaks as a civil defence measure; 6,300 of them were killed.

The aftermath

In the chaotic aftermath of the bombings, parents searched desperately for their children, and children for their parents. Some found only the charred remains or personal effects of their loved ones; others found no trace at all.

Efforts to reunite family members were made more difficult by the fact that many had suffered such severe injuries that they were scarcely recognisable.

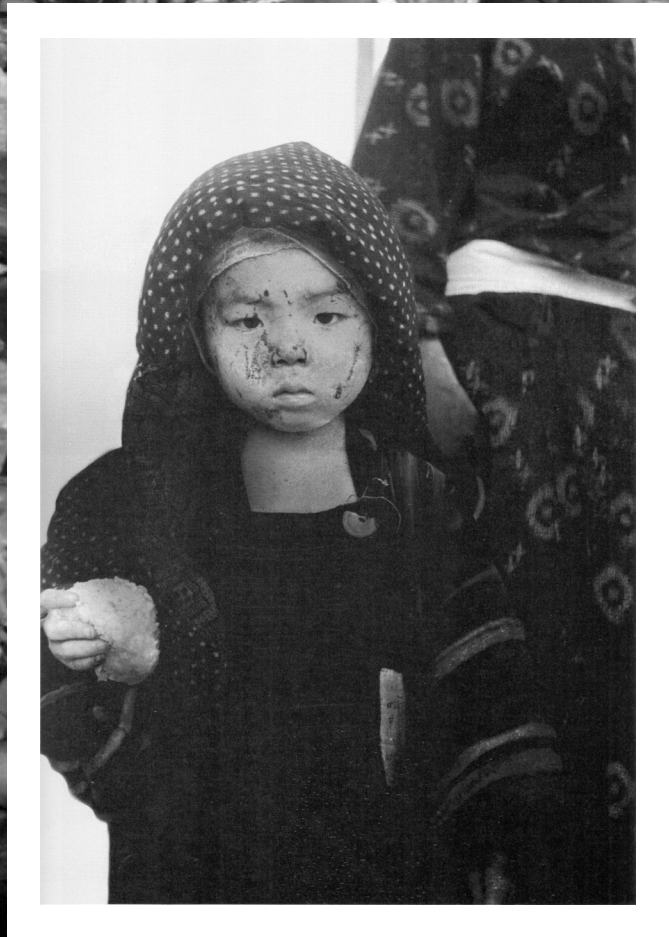
Some victims bore no physical scars at all but suddenly fell ill and died. Their deaths mystified first responders, who were unaware that a new type of weapon with pernicious, radioactive effects had been used.

Many pregnant women in the cities miscarried or gave birth to babies that died during infancy, as radiation from the bombs had entered their wombs. Congenital abnormalities, including microcephaly, were common among babies exposed in the womb.



Nagasaki one month after the attack. Credit: US government

A boy in Nagasaki receives rationed food in the aftermath.
Credit: Yōsuke Yamahata



Shinichi's tricycle

At the time of the attack on Hiroshima, three-year-old Shinichi Tetsutani was outside his home doing what he loved most – riding his tricycle.

He suffered major injuries, including burns to his whole body, and died several hours later. His two sisters, Michiko and Yoko, were also killed.

Their father remarked years later: “This should never happen to children. Please work to create a peaceful world where children can play to their heart’s content.”

Shinichi's burnt tricycle is now on permanent display at the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum, and a sculpture based on it can be found at the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Museum in Geneva.

It has become a poignant symbol of children's suffering in the nuclear attacks.



Credit: Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum, donated by Nobuo Tetsutani

Sisters in Hiroshima

Two-year-old Kimino Wataoka and her five-year-old sister, Hirono, were at home with their parents when Hiroshima was attacked. All four of them were killed.

Another sister, Kayoko, had been close to ground zero and also died. Only the eldest sister, Chizuko, survived.

It is believed that this photo of Kimino (left) and Hirono (right) was taken just one day before the nuclear bombing. Credit: Miho Iwata



Irradiated by the bomb

Toru Ikemoto was seven years old and his sister, Aiko, was nine when Hiroshima was destroyed. Both were indoors, around 1 kilometre from the hypocentre.

Within four or five days of the attack, their hair started falling out and they experienced fevers and bleeding gums – symptoms of acute radiation poisoning.

While both recovered from the acute stage of the illness, they ultimately succumbed to the delayed effects of radiation. Toru died at age 11 and Aiko at 29.

Siblings Toru (left) and Aiko (right) at the Hiroshima Red Cross Hospital in October 1945. Credit: Shunkichi Kikuchi



Survivors

Those who, by chance, survived the nuclear bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki became known in Japanese as *hibakusha*, or “explosion-affected people”.

Many endured life-long pain and discomfort due to their injuries, along with psychological trauma. Some developed thick scar tissue over their bodies and faces or lived for decades with fragments of glass embedded deep in their flesh.

Women faced particular hardship and stigma because of fears that genetic damage caused by the bombs would be passed on to their children and grandchildren.

Within a few years of the attacks, survivors began developing cancers and other illnesses at unusually high rates as a result of the delayed effects of radiation. Leukaemia was especially common in the early years.

To alert the world to the danger of nuclear weapons, many survivors have publicly shared their personal testimonies of what happened in 1945. Some who were children at the time of the attacks are still alive today and continue this truth-telling work.

Their message has been clear and consistent over the decades: Nuclear weapons and humanity cannot coexist.

In 2024, Nihon Hidankyo – a Japanese confederation of organisations representing survivors – won the Nobel Peace Prize “for its efforts to achieve a world free of nuclear weapons and for demonstrating through witness testimony that nuclear weapons must never be used again”.

The courageous, unstinting advocacy of survivors has inspired many people around the world to join the movement for nuclear abolition.

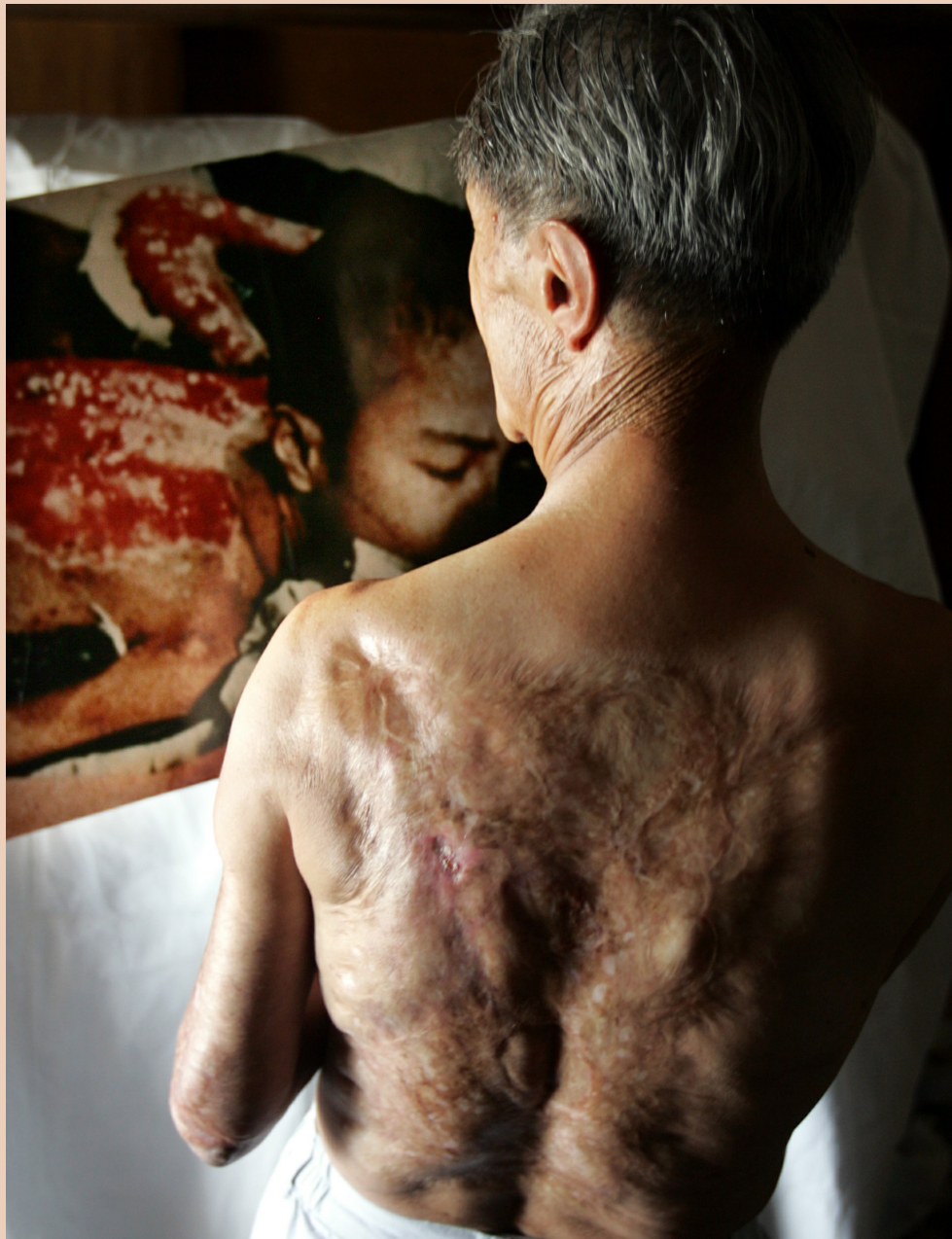
A survivor and advocate

As a 16-year-old boy, Sumiteru Taniguchi survived the nuclear bombing of Nagasaki. “In the flash of the explosion, I was blown off my bicycle from behind and slapped down against the ground,” he recounted.

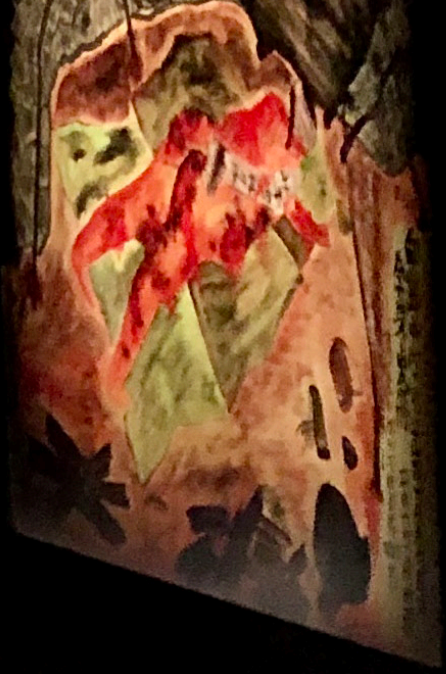
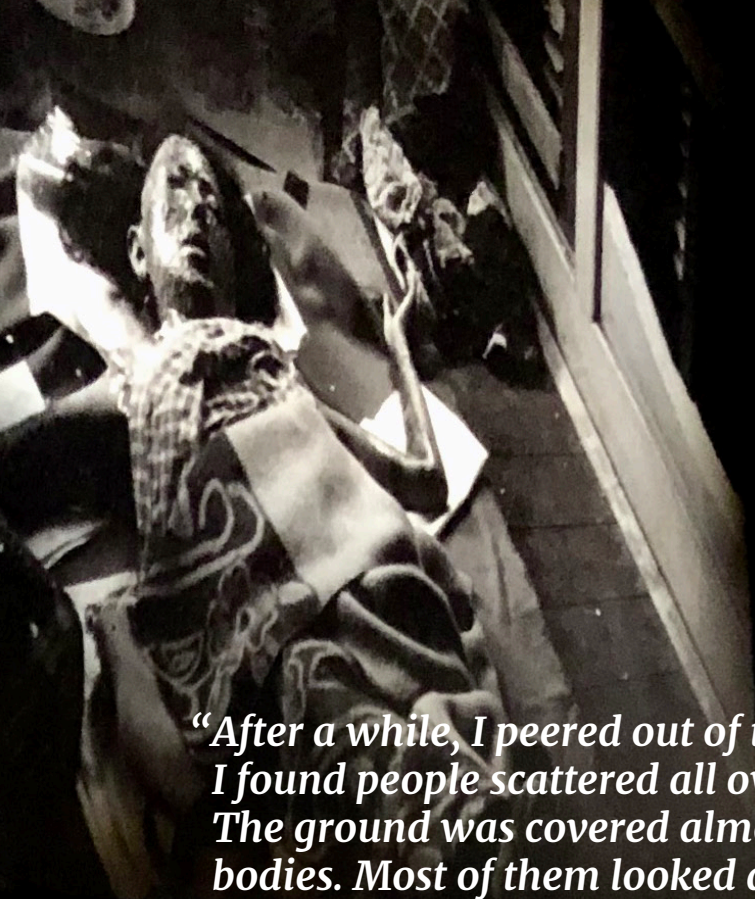
When he lifted his head, he saw that the children who had been playing all around him just moments before were now dead.

Despite being almost 2 kilometres from the hypocentre, he suffered severe burns to his back, left arm and left leg. His wounds soon became infected, and he spent almost four years in hospital recovering, including 21 months lying on his stomach.

The pain from his injuries never went away. He devoted much of his life to the cause of abolishing nuclear weapons.

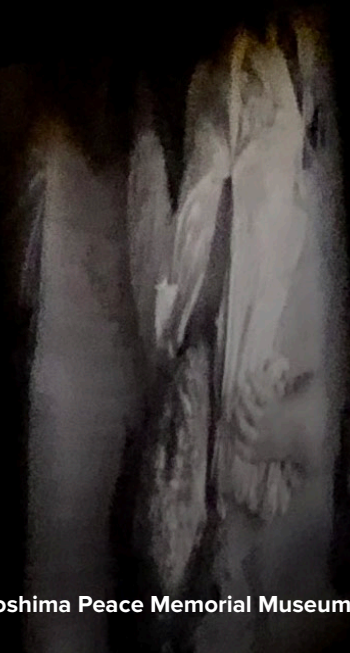
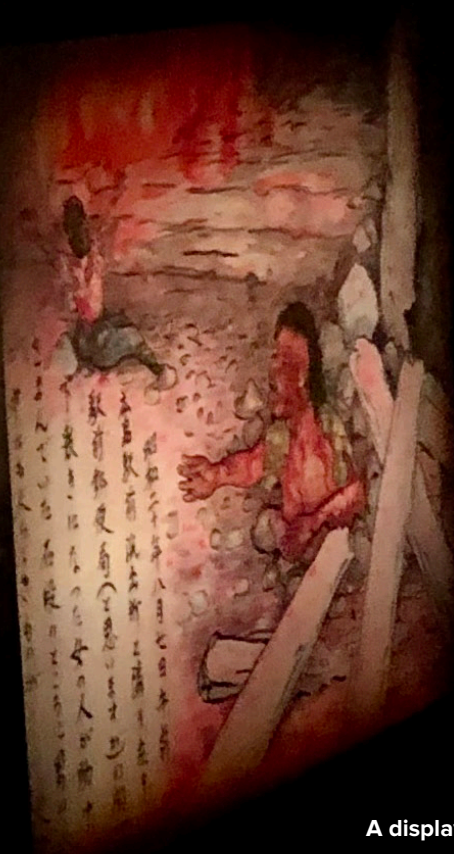


Sumiteru Taniguchi looks at an image of himself taken in 1946, his back bearing the scars of the Nagasaki bomb. Credit: Yuriko Nakao



“After a while, I peered out of the air raid shelter. I found people scattered all over the playground. The ground was covered almost entirely with bodies. Most of them looked dead and lay still. Here and there, however, some were thrashing their legs or raising their arms.”

– Fujio Tsujimoto, five years old, Nagasaki



A display at the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum.