The TPNW: Our Lantern in The Storm

Remarks at the High Level Session of the 2nd Meeting of States Parties to the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, November 27, 2023

President and Distinguished Delegates

It is a profound honour to address you today, as we continue the hard work of strengthening a treaty we fought so hard – and against such odds – to achieve.

As a hibakusha – a 13-year old schoolchild when my hometown of Hiroshima was destroyed in a single, evil flash – my main contribution to our common struggle has been to bear witness to the atomic Hell I saw and miraculously survived.

On January 24, 1946 – as I was trying, in shock and grief, to piece my life back together – the first United Nations General Assembly resolution was adopted, calling for “the elimination from national armaments of atomic weapons.” Seventy one years later, in July 2017, 122 states adopted the TPNW, finally delivering on that solemn promise.

I was here at the UN in the General Assembly at that extraordinary moment, describing it as “the beginning of the end of nuclear
weapons,” and beseeching – as I do again today – every world leader to build on that beginning and hasten the end of humanity’s nuclear nightmare.

For nearly 80 years, I have been bearing witness with so many other survivors of nuclear violence – of the two atomic bombings, and the more than two thousand nuclear tests. I have walked in the inspiring company of countless courageous campaigners, the unsung heroes of our movement. And the favourite part of my journey has been meeting young people in high schools, colleges and universities around the world, telling them the terrible truth about nuclear weapons: the reality they need to know, so they can help create a livable world for their futures.

But while I always found a receptive audience among students, for decades we survivors remained out in the cold, confined to the margins of diplomacy. We hoped that might change back in 1995, at the Review and Extension Conference of the NPT. We had waited since 1970 for the treaty’s nuclear-armed states to honour their side of the NPT’s ‘grand bargain’ and disarm. In 1995, they requested – and were granted – an indefinite extension, assuring us that they would now definitely do the right thing.
But by the time of the 2010 NPT Review Conference, it was clear that those solemn promises were again being broken, leading states to express “deep concern at the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of any use of nuclear weapons.” Now, that may sound obvious, but at the time it signalled a paradigm shift from national to human security, leading in quick succession to the ‘Humanitarian Initiative,’ the ‘Humanitarian Pledge’ to ban the Bomb, and to that triumph of humanitarian disarmament, our beloved treaty.

But while the TPNW is a game-changer, the old games go on. In Hiroshima, just a few months ago, G7 leaders issued a so-called ‘Hiroshima Vision on Nuclear Disarmament’ which not only failed to mention the TPNW but declared that nuclear weapons “deter aggression and prevent wars,” a lie that I described as “blasphemy” against the spirit of the place – the Peace Memorial Park in Hiroshima! – where those sleepwalking politicians were gathered.

But while we need to work hard at this meeting to strengthen our treaty, we should also continue to celebrate it, to spread the good news, especially to young people, that paradigms can shift: that another, non-nuclear world is possible.
Such optimism is hard to sustain at this desperate moment in world affairs. When I think of all the innocent children dead or trapped under the rubble in current wars throughout the world, I return to my young self, pinned under the blazing ruins of Hiroshima; I hear afresh a stranger’s voice urging me: “Don’t give up! Keep moving! Keep pushing! I am trying to free you. See the light coming through that opening? Crawl toward it…”

My friends, the TPNW is our light, our lantern in the storm. Let us hold it high: and keep moving.