

Hiroshima survivors plead for nuclear-free world as global tensions rise

Survivors of 1945 atomic bomb express deep concern amid bellicose rhetoric from Russia and North Korea



A photograph taken on 8 September 1945 of the sea of rubble in Hiroshima, a month after the first atomic bomb ever used in warfare was dropped on the Japanese city. Photograph: Stanley Troutman/AP

Justin McCurry in Hiroshima

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Toshiyuki Mimaki was playing in front of his family home in Hiroshima on the morning of 6 August 1945 when he saw a flash in the sky – the moment the then three-year-old became witness to the world's first atomic bombing.

Almost eight decades on, the spectre of nuclear war has returned with greater menace than at any time since the cold war, amid **Vladimir Putin's threats**

against Ukraine and North Korea's seemingly **unstoppable rise to the status of nuclear-armed state**.

Despite their advancing years, Mimaki and other survivors of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and – three days later – Nagasaki are again urging world leaders to ensure that the human misery of nuclear warfare remains consigned to the final, catastrophic days of the Pacific war.

“My greatest fear is that the Ukraine conflict will escalate,” Mimaki, 80, told the Guardian at the Hiroshima office of Hidankyo – a confederation of A-bomb survivor groups he has co-chaired since last year.

“When I think about what Putin said recently, I wouldn't be surprised if he used nuclear weapons. And what would the US response be? We could be on the verge of another world war. I don't think Putin is listening.”



Toshiyuki Mimaki, co-chair of the Japan Confederation of A- and H-Bomb Sufferers Organisations. Photograph: Justin McCurry/The Guardian

The destruction of Hiroshima has become a gruesome reference point since Putin first threatened to use nuclear weapons in an attempt to deter the US and its allies from supporting Ukrainian resistance to the Russian invasion.

The prospect that he could order the use of a smaller “battlefield” nuclear weapon to alter the course of the war in Moscow’s favour prompted Joe Biden to warn that the world was on the brink of “**Armageddon**” for the first time since the Cuban missile crisis.

As Biden conceded this month that the US would soon be confronted by two major nuclear weapon states – **Russia and China** – North Korea claimed that its recent volley of missile tests were intended to **simulate a tactical nuclear strike** against South Korea.

“The power of the Hiroshima peace message is as strong as ever, but its resonance is even greater given the current international situation,” said Makoto Kubo, assistant director of Hiroshima city’s international peace promotion department. “It isn’t just relevant to **North Korea** and Russia, but to every country that possesses nuclear weapons.”

More than 60 countries have ratified a 2021 treaty to ban the possession and use of nuclear weapons, but they do not include any of the recognised nuclear states or countries, including **Japan**, that fall under the US nuclear umbrella.



The man who survived Hiroshima: 'I had entered a living hell on earth'

The failure to make progress on disarmament prompted the UN secretary-general, António Guterres, to warn in August that humanity was “in danger of forgetting the lessons forged in the terrifying fires of Hiroshima and Nagasaki”. The mayor of Nagasaki, Tomihisa Taue, said he feared the devastation visited on his city in 1945 had “not got across to the world well enough, and [is] looking to become a reality”.

Drawing on faint memories and conversations with his mother, Mimaki knows those horrors only too well.

He and his family were living in Tokyo when his father, who was from Hiroshima, evacuated them to his home town after large areas of the Japanese capital were destroyed in the March 1945 **firebombings**.

Months later, the Enola Gay, a US B-29 bomber, dropped a 15-kiloton nuclear bomb on Hiroshima, instantly killing between 60,000 and 80,000 people, with the death toll rising to 140,000 by the end of the year.

Mimaki recalled watching, petrified, as people who had been in downtown Hiroshima when the bomb exploded passed his home, 17km from the centre, as they fled the fires that raged across the city, the air thick with radioactive ash. “Their hair had been burned off and they were begging for water,” he said.

Today, the number of people officially recognised as having died from the effects of the Hiroshima bomb stands at just over 330,000, while the average age of the 118,000 survivors has crept up to 84.

“I’m reasonably healthy, but I can sense my physical strength and memory weakening,” said Mimaki, who has taken his message to the UN headquarters and gives talks to schoolchildren about his experiences. “But our aim is still to achieve a world without nuclear weapons while we are still alive.”

Hiroshima’s recovery began in the immediate aftermath of the attack; today, the burned-out shell of the “A-bomb dome” and the sprawling peace park are among the few physical reminders of the attack.

It will have the opportunity to remind world leaders of the horrors of nuclear annihilation – whether in a Japanese city or, potentially, on a Ukrainian battlefield – when it hosts the G7 summit next May.

“I want them to go to the peace museum and look at the photographs of children with their skin and clothes hanging off,” Mimaki said. “Let’s show them the reality of nuclear war, so that they go home with those images imprinted on their minds.”