

Haunted by bombing, Hiroshima survivor continues fight against nuclear weapons

Setsuko Thurlow, 88, isn't just disappointed. She's choking back tears of frustration and grief as she describes the response she's had from Prime Minister Justin Trudeau on nuclear disarmament over the last four years.

"That's extremely, extremely disappointing – so disturbing," said the Hiroshima survivor who has been actively campaigning against nuclear weapons for more than 60 years.

"It's not just me. There's a lot of people disappointed. And that's not the way the prime minister should be behaving. If this is a democracy, he (Trudeau) should be sharing his ideas and encouraging debate."

The world is marking the 75th anniversary this month of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, events that still haunt and propel Thurlow in her passion for the disarmament cause.

On June 22 she sent a letter to Trudeau asking that he acknowledge that Canada helped to produce the first atomic weapons and has copied the letter to all 338 parliamentarians in Ottawa. She is still waiting for a reply.

So far the only time Trudeau has ever spoken about nuclear weapons policy was to mock efforts to declare the weapons illegal, Thurlow said.

"There can be all sorts of people talking about nuclear disarmament, but if they do not actually have nuclear arms, it is sort of useless to have them around, talking," Trudeau told the House of Commons in 2017.

"It is well-meaning, as the NDP often are, but we are actually taking real, tangible, concrete steps that are going to make a difference in moving towards a nuclear-free world."

Trudeau was not in attendance later that year when Thurlow accepted the Nobel Peace Prize on behalf of the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons. Nor did anyone in his government congratulate her.

The Trudeau government fell in line with U.S.-dictated NATO policy and refused to participate in United Nations negotiations leading to the Treaty to Prohibit Nuclear Weapons in 2017.

Canada voted against the treaty while 122 nations voted it in. Since then 40 states, including the Vatican, have ratified the treaty. Once 50 countries have ratified it, the treaty comes into legal force.

As one of a dwindling number of hibakusha, or survivors of the first two nuclear weapons, Thurlow has become an important face of the treaty and the campaign that brought it to the UN.

Her drive for a nuclear-free world began almost from the moment she woke up amidst the rubble left by the bomb that killed at least 70,000 people in a flash of heat and blinding light in Hiroshima.

She was then a 13-year-old school girl, bused downtown with 30 classmates to help crack coded messages for the Japanese military. She woke up to a world of pain under a pile of debris that morning of Aug. 6, 1945.

"I remember a sensation of floating in the air. As I regained consciousness in the total silence and darkness, I realized I was pinned in the ruins of the collapsed building," she recalled.

"Gradually, I began to hear my classmates' faint cries for help. 'Mother help me!' 'God help me!' Then suddenly I felt hands touching me and loosening the timbers that pinned me. A man's voice said, 'Don't give up! I'm trying to free you! Keep moving! See the light coming through that opening? Crawl toward it and try to get out.' "

She got out and kept moving toward the light. Educated by Methodist missionaries, "teachers who helped us to heal our own wounded hearts and spirits," Thurlow had to overcome her doubts before she could accept baptism.

She was one of just three students from her class who survived the bomb that killed at least 140,000 people in the city – a bomb dropped on civilians by a self-proclaimed Christian nation. Three days later, another 70,000 or more died in the bombing of Nagasaki.

"My mind was full of questions," she said.

She married United Church of Canada missionary James Thurlow, came to the University of Toronto for two years of studies in social work, then returned to Japan for five years with James as an educational missionary. In 1962 she and James were back in Toronto, where she began a career in social work.

In the early 1980s, as then Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau began meeting with world leaders to urge a consensus for disarmament, Thurlow was again publicly involved in disarmament activism.

Inspired by Rev. Tom McKillop, she took up work with Rev. Massey Lombardi to get the Peace Garden built in front of Toronto City Hall. When Pope John Paul II came to light the eternal flame and bless the peace garden, Thurlow was there to greet him.

"He held my hand so tight. He wanted to pray for those who perished in Hiroshima. Once again I had tears. I am most grateful," she said.

A new generation of activists behind the International Campaign Against Nuclear Weapons sought Thurlow out as their work picked up steam. Again, Thurlow felt the support of a pope. She was invited to a Vatican conference in advance of the UN vote for the Treaty to Prohibit Nuclear Weapons. She was encouraged when the Holy See became one of the first states to sign and ratify the treaty.

When Pope Francis travelled to Japan last year, Thurlow was a special invited guest for the Pope's address in Hiroshima.

"All of us in ICAN feel so supported by the Catholic Church, starting with the Pope," Thurlow said.

The Pope's 2017 declaration that even owning nuclear weapons, let alone threatening to use them, is gravely immoral was an important step, Thurlow said.

Canada's bishops backed the Pope last year with an eight-page [Statement on Nuclear Weapons](#).

To mark the 75th anniversary of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Canadian Council of Churches – which includes the Catholic bishops – sought to put the moral argument at the centre of any talk about nuclear war.

"We believe that nuclear weapons are evil and that they present a unique, existential threat to humanity," said a July 8 letter to Foreign Affairs Minister François-Philippe Champagne from the council, which includes churches representing about 80 per cent of all Canadian Christians.

"We want our country to join the growing community of states which have rejected nuclear weapons entirely. We appeal to you to sign and ratify the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons."



Churches, particularly the Catholic Church, have an important role in pushing nuclear powers to act, said retired senator and former Canadian ambassador for disarmament Doug Roche.

The Edmonton-based statesman praises “the courage and the strength of the Canadian Catholic bishops in supporting, in giving complete and unreserved support to Pope Francis’ condemnation of the possession of nuclear weapons.”

He is disgusted by the U.S. bishops’ “weak and pusillanimous” statement on the 75th anniversary of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which fails to even allude to the Pope Francis statement on the morality of owning nuclear arms or the American government’s commitment to spend \$1.5 trillion modernizing its nuclear arsenal.

“This is primarily a deep moral issue of the highest order. The bishops are called to lead,” said Roche, who served as ambassador for disarmament from 1984 to 1989.

Thurlow sees that morality first in terms of an examination of conscience. She’s asking Trudeau to recall that Canada was a full partner in the Manhattan project that produced the bomb.

Thurlow isn’t asking for a full-blown apology, just an acknowledgment of the known history and an expression of regret.

She isn’t angry just with Trudeau and his government. Even the Japanese government of Shinzō Abe doesn’t want to hear from the hibakusha, Thurlow said. Even worse is all the citizens who just don’t want to know.

“The majority of the world really doesn’t wish to hear our voices, and they haven’t heard us,” Thurlow said. “They choose not to hear us. That’s disappointing. They are just allowing these leaders to pile up the money, invest the money in armaments, to massacre human beings – mass killing. That’s a crime.”