

KOREAN ATOMIC BOMB VICTIMS:Forgotten Survivors

100,000	A-BOMBED AT HIROSHIMA AND NAGASAKI
50,000	KILLED IMMEDIATELY OR SHORTLY AFTER
50,000	SURVIVORS (8000 REMAINING IN JAPAN)
30,000	RETURNED TO KOREA SAFELY, OF WHOM:
10,000	SINCE DIED, MOST OF ATOMIC DISEASES
20,000	TOTAL SURVIVORS NOW IN SOUTH KOREA

The above figures refer not to Japanese victims of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but to Korean victims. Usually, when numbers like the above are cited, people react with shocked disbelief. "100,000 Korean victims!" They find it hard to believe that there were that many Koreans in Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the time, let alone anywhere near that number caught in the blasts.

The reason why there were so many Koreans in Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the time of the atomic bomb has to do with Japan's military policy up to and during the Second World War. From 1910 to 1945, Japan ruled Korea, a country which was a sovereign nation for thousands of years, as a colonial power. During this period, hundreds of thousands of young men and women were taken by force to Japan. Between 1939-1944, over 2 million Korean people were dragged to Japan, young women as "comfort troops" for Japanese soldiers and men as draft soldiers and cheap labor sent either to the war front or forced to work in mines and factories manufacturing military supplies. Following the men came brides, wives, and children to an inhospitable land. Often treated as slaves, Koreans faced extreme discrimination.

On August 6 and 8, 1945, atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki by the United States, and about 100,000 Koreans were victims of the blast. At that time, Hiroshima and Nagasaki were military bases with many factories producing military weapons and ships, and a high population of Korean workforce lived in these two cities. Half of the 100,000 Korean victims died on the spot. Immediately after the blast, the others, fearing repercussions from the Japanese, stayed near the epicenter, increasing their chances of contracting atomic diseases. Those who sought treatment found they were often ignored, as Japanese victims were treated first.

When Korea was liberated from the Japanese in late August, 1945, thousands of the Korean victims returned to Korea only to face a country under U.S. Military Government and then horrors of

another war - the Korean War. From the very beginning of the Cold War after World War II, Korea was pushed into the frontline of American strategic policy. Thus, the U.S. Military Government could not tolerate the dissemination of information about the "horrors" of the atomic bomb or even an association of its victims, especially since suppression of such information was an option in a country where U.S. strategists calculated that the use of atomic weapons still remained a real possibility. The suppression of the history of Korean atomic victims has been a function of an unfolding history, that of U.S. military policy in Asia, an aspect of which is nuclear policy on the Korean peninsula. Not until 1966, a year after normalization of relations of Japan, did the Association of Korean Atomic Bomb Victims form and even at this time, with an assumption that its activities would be "advocacy" oriented rather than "political." (Today, the association has over 9000 members.) To this day in South Korea, taking a political stance against nuclear weapons runs the high risk of being branded a communist under the National Security Law and being imprisoned.

The Japanese government washed its hands off Korean A-Bomb victims with the signing of the 1965 Japan-Korea Treaty. The U.S. absolved itself of any responsibility of atomic victims be they Korean or Japanese with the San Francisco Peace Treaty signed with Japan in 1951. An indication of the "forgotten survivors" is symbolized by the Korean A-Bomb victims memorial in Hiroshima. The Peace Park in Hiroshima is dotted with memorials dedicated to the hundreds of thousands of Japanese who were exposed to and destroyed by the atomic bomb. As the Peace Park is a central symbol of hope for many in a war-ridden world, it is shocking to learn that the Peace Park is for Japanese victims only. The Korean memorial is not allowed to stand inside, so it is out by a busy street with its inscription defaced, a blatant reminder of the neglect and scorn still received by these unjustly used people and an ominous shadow over present-day platitudes for peace.

The struggle of these Koreans, unfortunate victims of the Japanese colonial policy of forced labor and then victims of U.S. atomic weapons dropped in Japan, continues today in two ways:

First, on average, about half of a surviving family of five is unhealthy. Thus half of the bomb sufferers find it difficult to work and one-sixth are too sick to work at all. And there have been no internal programs of relief or assistance provided by the South Korean government. Korean A-Bomb victims experience the same health problems as other victims: scars, physical weakness, mysterious pains from nervous disorders, cancer, blood, skin and stomach diseases, heart malfunctions, loss of eyesight, and strange pus excretions. The nature of radiation sicknesses is that they are undiagnosable by ordinary medicine and unpredictable. Yet, in all of South Korea, there is only one hospital for radiation diseases which was recently set up with an annual budget of only \$65,000 which barely covers the salary of

the medical staff and leaves little to nothing for medical supplies. The victims and their families are shunned and ostracized by a suspicious and frightened community since it is widely believed that radiation diseases are contagious. Within this vicious cycle of sickness, poverty, fear, and misinformation, the Korean survivors, which number approximately 20,000 living in South Korea, struggle for subsistence from day to day and relief from their pain. In addition to the survivors, there is also another group of victims. Their children and grandchildren also suffer from unidentifiable diseases resulting from radiation, extreme poverty and alienation from society. Over 4,000 victims live in a village in southeast Korea called Hapchon which is referred to as "Hiroshima in Korea" where they are trying to establish their own self-help village, overcoming slum-like conditions.

The struggle also continues in another way. Since 1958, the United States has deployed nuclear weapons in Korea without interruption. Today, there are more than 30 megatons of nuclear weapons in Korea which is more than 2000 times the power of the bomb that exploded over Hiroshima, enough to reduce the entire Korean peninsula to radioactive ashes. These nuclear weapons are under the operational control of the U.S. Command in Korea, and unlike in Europe, the U.S. has the power to make a unilateral decision to use them without consulting the host country. Living in one of the most heavily militarized areas of the world where war could break out at any moment, the Korean A-bomb victims face the ever-increasing threat of the use of the nuclear weapons in the Korean peninsula. Most recently, the U.S. Defense Ministry announced the deployment of a brigade of N-capable Lance Missiles in South Korea in the spring of 1987.

The story of the Korean A-bomb victims was never so needed to be told as today, when Korea faces the most critical times in her history. In a recent survey taken among Korean A-Bomb victims, while expressing pessimism regarding their own physical conditions and future prospect, many of them expressed the desire to become, because of their A-Bomb experience, "a witness for peace and working for banning nuclear weapons." A challenge is posed to the American peace movement whether we are ready and willing to hear their witness and take action on the nuclear threat in Korea.