

DISCUSSION

Seventy years after Hiroshima and Nagasaki: Reflections on the consequences of nuclear detonation



Jeff Cooke, ICRC

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In this interview, conducted after their visit to Hiroshima, President Peter Maurer and President Tadateru Konoe reflect on the human cost of nuclear weapons and present the perspective of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement on the Conferences on the Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons in Oslo, Nayarit, Mexico and Vienna, and the challenges ahead for nuclear disarmament.



2015 marks the seventieth anniversary of the detonation of the nuclear bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. You have just been to Hiroshima, one of only two places in the world that have known a nuclear attack. The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement has been active in calling for the elimination of nuclear weapons, especially in recent times. Why is this so important now, seventy years later?

Tadateru Konoe: First of all, I highly appreciate this opportunity for the ICRC and the Federation to work together on such an important issue. From the very beginning, immediately after the bombing of Hiroshima, the ICRC was involved in bringing assistance to those in need.² More and more National Societies have also gotten involved over the years in various ways, including by visiting Hiroshima. We have made nuclear disarmament an issue for the entire Movement and will continue to work to take this further.

We are commemorating the seventieth anniversary of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki this year. This is an important moment to remind the entire world about the scale of the humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons. From these attacks we learned much about the destructive power of nuclear weapons caused by the heat and blast forces that they release. We also learned about the devastating and long-term impact of radiation, which is still affecting survivors today. The average age of survivors is now close to 80, and caring for them will become more and more difficult in the years to come. We can use the opportunity of this important anniversary to send a message to the entire world.



Peter Maurer and Tadateru Konoe pay tribute to the victims of the nuclear bomb in Hiroshima.

Peter Maurer: Seventy years after the nuclear bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki the commitment to disarm remains unfulfilled and, given the stockpiles of nuclear weapons today, it is particularly important to find a way to move from this commitment to concrete acts. In recent years, opportunities have arisen to advance

1 This discussion was conducted by Vincent Bernard, Editor-in-Chief of the *Review*, in Tokyo on 12 February 2015. President Maurer and President Konoe visited Hiroshima on 11 February 2015. President Konoe visited Nagasaki on 12 February 2015, accompanied by an ICRC delegation.

2 For an account by ICRC field delegate Dr Marcel Junod, the first foreign doctor to reach Hiroshima after the bombing, see Marcel Junod, “The Hiroshima Disaster”, *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 22, No. 230, 1982; Marcel Junod, “The Hiroshima Disaster (II)”, *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 22, No. 231, 1982.

nuclear disarmament. We must make the most of these opportunities, to find ways to translate existing commitments into real, meaningful action.

By focusing on the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons and their implications under IHL, the ICRC and the Movement³ emphasize the rationale for action on nuclear weapons and lend force to the efforts to achieve a ban on their use and their total elimination. We know that this will not be accomplished overnight. But given the enormous humanitarian consequences that occur in the wake of nuclear detonation, which both the ICRC and the Japanese Red Cross Society witnessed in 1945, and the ongoing risks that such weapons may again be used in the future, it is crucial that we push all States to act.

To continue this work, what, then, would be the role of the Movement in the debate on nuclear disarmament, which is often perceived as highly political?

Tadateru Konoe: The atmosphere surrounding the nuclear disarmament debate has always been political, but it should not prevent us from making progress in the right direction. As the Movement has repeatedly emphasized, we are more concerned about the humanitarian consequences than the political implications. I think our strong humanitarian messages – namely, the severe



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Peter Maurer and Tadateru Konoe listen to the testimony of Mr Sadao Yamamoto, who survived the explosion of the nuclear bomb in Hiroshima. Read his testimony and the testimony of other survivors in the “Voices and Perspectives” section of this issue of the *Review*.

human costs of nuclear weapons and our concerns about whether it is possible to adequately assist the victims of a nuclear detonation – are critical and can help change the mindset of decision-makers. We believe that these messages should inform decision-makers and influence the political agenda. In order to do so, the Movement must continue to

focus on the humanitarian consequences of any use of nuclear weapons. Many organizations are already working toward the goal of total disarmament, from

3 Editor’s note (all subsequent notes are from the editor): The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (Federation), and the national Red Cross and Red Crescent societies (National Societies) of each country together form the International Movement of the Red Cross and Red Crescent (Movement).

various angles, and we as a Movement can enlarge the basis for working together towards this objective.

In 2011, the Movement resolved to work towards the elimination of nuclear weapons.⁴ What actions have been taken since 2011 by the ICRC, the Federation, and National Societies?

Peter Maurer: The ICRC has been focused on contributing to the conversation on some of the critical issues discussed at the three conferences on the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons held in Oslo, Nayarit and Vienna. What struck me during the visit to Hiroshima were the accounts of survivors.⁵ When you listen carefully to these accounts, they prefigure all the elements of the humanitarian consequences discussed at these conferences.

The use of nuclear weapons is indiscriminate. We have seen the effects on the civilian population and militaries – women, children and soldiers – alike. Thanks to the conferences that I just mentioned, we now have a better idea of the ramifications more globally, especially their potential impact on food production and the environment. This has led us to reinforce our efforts as well as to re-examine our thinking on nuclear weapons within the framework of international humanitarian law.

Picking up on what President Konoe said earlier, these conferences have allowed the ICRC and the Federation to bring our perspective into the debate about nuclear disarmament, which is based on the Movement’s work in Japan in 1945 and in addressing the long-term needs of those who survived the atomic bombings. The information and perspectives that we as a Movement have brought to the table cannot be ignored.⁶ Given that, over the past decades, the discussion on nuclear disarmament has been primarily based on strategic military considerations, this humanitarian perspective creates the possibility for a different type of discourse.

In 2013, the Movement took an important step when it adopted a four-year action plan on nuclear weapons.⁷ The plan outlines activities that National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies can undertake in their respective countries to raise awareness of the concerns on nuclear weapons. With this action plan, National Societies are becoming more active and involved. Many of them have

4 Council of Delegates of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, Resolution 1: Working Towards the Elimination of Nuclear Weapons, 26 November 2011, available at: www.icrc.org/eng/resources/documents/resolution/council-delegates-resolution-1-2011.htm.

5 See the survivors’ testimony featured in the “Voices and Perspectives” section of this edition of the *Review*.

6 See, for example, ICRC, *The Effects of Nuclear Weapons on Human Health*, Information Note 1, ICRC, Geneva, February 2013, available at: www.icrc.org/eng/resources/documents/legal-fact-sheet/03-19-nuclear-weapons-human-health-1-4132.htm; ICRC, *Climate Effects of Nuclear War and Implications for Global Food Production*, Information Note 2, ICRC, Geneva, February 2013, available at: www.icrc.org/eng/resources/documents/legal-fact-sheet/03-19-nuclear-weapons-global-food-production-2-4132.htm.

7 Council of Delegates of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, Resolution: Working Towards the Elimination of Nuclear Weapons: Four-Year Action Plan, November 2013, available at: www.icrc.org/eng/assets/files/red-cross-crescent-movement/council-delegates-2013/cod13-r1-nuclear-weapons-adopted-eng.pdf.

been speaking to governments, to parliaments and to the press on this issue to create a climate in which the humanitarian impact is an accelerator for the nuclear disarmament discussion. The ICRC has been working closely with National Societies to support their efforts in this area.

Tadateru Konoe: I agree with President Maurer that nuclear weapons are an important issue for the Movement because of their indiscriminate nature and the severe destruction they cause, continuing to cause death and suffering over decades and even generations after detonation.

The use of nuclear weapons raises serious problems under international humanitarian law, but still there are people who insist that their use can be legally justified. I have a much different view, and even more so after hearing the testimonies of those who survived and lost loved ones in Hiroshima and Nagasaki and from seeing those who are still dealing with the impact on their health. It is clear that these weapons must be eliminated once and for all. Many people understand this in theory, but after visiting Hiroshima and Nagasaki and hearing the voices of survivors, perhaps others would better understand what we are talking about.

As the four-year action plan notes, the Federation's work to implement the resolution takes several forms. First, the Federation plays its usual role as coordinator to facilitate National Societies' endeavours as appropriate. The Federation has provided the platform for National Societies' involvement in multilateral meetings, such as the recent meeting in Vienna on the humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons, and has ensured that their voices are heard, particularly regarding the absence of any adequate capacity or plans to provide humanitarian assistance in response to nuclear detonation. In continuing its close collaboration with the ICRC on this issue, the Federation will also vigorously support the international network of National Societies active in promoting the Movement's position on nuclear weapons. Moreover, the Federation ensures the timely exchange of information on action taken, past and upcoming events, and the work of specialized organizations in the field of nuclear weapons.

Looking to the possibility that the world may one day have to respond to another nuclear weapon detonation, what is the role of the Movement, globally, with regards to preparedness, response and recovery if such an event were to occur?

Tadateru Konoe: As I said earlier, it is just about impossible to be adequately prepared for even a single nuclear detonation. Regardless of response efforts, the casualties and damage in the immediate aftermath of a nuclear explosion would be so extensive that an effective humanitarian response is unrealistic. Infrastructure would be decimated. First responders in the vicinity are likely to be victims themselves, supplies and facilities would likely be destroyed, and the presence of radiation would largely rule out immediately sending responders into the contaminated area. Most States, and all humanitarian organizations that I am aware of, would be unable to cope with such a scenario.

Peter Maurer: This is an interesting discussion because the ICRC has expressed serious doubts as to whether the needs of victims could be adequately met in the aftermath of a nuclear detonation. The ICRC learnt much from its experience in Hiroshima, and we have sought to gain a better understanding of the current degree of preparedness of National Societies, organizations and States to respond to nuclear disaster.⁸ Over the past three years, through a series of studies, we have come to the conclusion that there is no existing capacity at the international level and in most States to adequately cope with the most likely scenarios of nuclear weapons use.

Some may question our assessment or believe that there is always a possibility to cope with such a major disaster, but underlying this view is an assumption that the nuclear weapon use will be very limited. President Kono and myself cannot foresee a scenario in which nuclear weapons would be used in such a limited way. The most realistic scenario is that if one nuclear bomb is used, more nuclear bombs will be used. One must have serious doubts whether this is the kind of scenario for which anyone can be prepared.



It is also very important not to create a situation where nuclear powers somehow place the responsibility for coping with the human impact of nuclear detonation on humanitarian organizations and say, “Our task is to have strategic military reflections, your task is to cope with the human impact.” We want to warn States that if this kind of weapon is going to be used, its destructive capacity, its long-term impact on health, food and the environment, will produce consequences for which it will be nearly impossible to be prepared to manage in any reasonable way.

You have heard the testimonies of survivors, and both the ICRC and the Japanese Red Cross assisted in the response to the attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. What, based on your experience and from listening to the testimonies, are the lessons learned from this experience about the needs of the victims in these situations?

Peter Maurer: These survivors’ testimonies illustrate quite well what we have been talking about in more general terms. Each of the survivors describes part of the reality of the explosion itself: the heat, the pressure, the radiation, the difficulty in finding assistance. In particular, the ability to provide assistance was severely

8 See Robin Coupland and Dominique Loye, “International Assistance for Victims of Use of Nuclear, Radiological, Biological and Chemical Weapons: Time for a Reality Check?”, *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 91, No. 874, 2009, available at: www.icrc.org/eng/resources/documents/interview/2013/03-04-nuclear-weapons-humanitarian-assistance.htm.

damaged because the helpers were killed and injured as much as everyone else. The inability to respond effectively was not due to a lack of will, it was because of a lack of capacity. The survivors' accounts included extremely graphic illustrations of how people sought assistance but the hospitals had been damaged, medical doctors and nurses were killed and medicine was contaminated. The testimonies underline the destructive nature of a nuclear bomb.

Tadateru Konoe: The difficulty in providing adequate medical care in the immediate aftermath is one very important lesson. In Hiroshima, the Japanese Red Cross Hospital happened to be very close to the epicentre of the bombing but, by chance, was one of the few hospitals to remain standing. The doctors and medical personnel who survived were mobilized. The same happened in Nagasaki. There, many nurses trained by the Red Cross were quickly dispatched to various different hospitals. Along with other medical personnel, they aided many people. Later, medics from neighbouring prefectures joined them to help save victims. But they had no knowledge about the impact of exposure to high levels of radiation. They worked without the necessary equipment or medicines and did not know how to treat the victims. So in that sense they were not prepared for this kind of event. They were full of goodwill and motivation but there was not much that they could do.

What surprised you most in listening to the stories of those who survived the explosion of the nuclear bomb in Hiroshima?

Tadateru Konoe: What we were told by survivors in both Hiroshima and Nagasaki is that everything happened within a few seconds. But for many of those who survived, those few seconds have had a life-long impact. In fact, it is still not entirely clear what all the long-term needs of the survivors are, because of the strong social stigma and the trauma that was carried on to the next generation or even generations, who may be unwilling to talk about their experience.

This morning a survivor told us that his parents were direct victims of the atomic bomb, but they did not want to tell him what had happened because they felt that if they told the truth their son would have difficulty getting married. There was some prejudice against victims of the atomic bomb because they might have been seriously affected by radiation.

Peter Maurer: This is a very interesting point because for a long time we were only focused on the physical impact of nuclear weapons. This is the most visible long-term effect. What strikes me when listening to survivors is the psycho-social impact – the psychological trauma that they went through during the war and



Jeff Cooke, ICRC

the discrimination they suffered afterwards. These are important elements that we have just started to discuss in the broader context of armed conflict. We have historically focused on the immediate physical injury of the war wounded, but increasingly my contact with survivors has brought into focus that another dimension that may be still be insufficiently addressed is the psycho-social impact of a specific weapon like a nuclear bomb.

A large number of States have raised concerns about the humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons in the recent conferences and other fora. What concrete action would the Movement like to see States take to ensure nuclear weapons are never used again?

Peter Maurer: Today the best action States can take is to fulfil their existing obligations and engage in the negotiation of a legally binding agreement or set of agreements that would outlaw the use of nuclear weapons and at the same time lead to comprehensive disarmament. There are a variety of different approaches to achieving this, and if it is to be pragmatic, the process should aim to be as inclusive as possible. As a Movement we are not going to propose what such an agreement should look like, the time frame to achieve it or where it should be developed; that is the responsibility of States. But we stress and will continue to stress that any such instrument must result in banning the use of nuclear weapons and in their complete elimination.

It is no longer radical to call for “global zero”. Even the UN Security Council has confirmed its commitment to the goal of a world without nuclear weapons.⁹ The question is how we can we advance nuclear disarmament and get to a process which allows us to conclude an agreement. It is time for States to explore the different possibilities for the architecture of an agreement or series of agreements and set a time frame to achieve it.

Even before nuclear weapons are eliminated, States, especially nuclear-armed States and their allies, must do more to reduce the risk of a detonation. Greater efforts must be made to reduce the significance of nuclear weapons in military plans, doctrines and policies, and the number of warheads on high alert status can be reduced. Many of these steps derive from long-standing political commitments and in particular the 2010 NPT action plan, and should be followed through as a matter of urgency.

Tadateru Konoe: There are still some States which insist that nuclear weapons act as a deterrent and are a “necessary evil”, so to speak. But in my view, it would be quite difficult if not impossible to use such weapons without violating international humanitarian law. Thus, there is no point in keeping or producing nuclear weapons that violate the law, and a better approach is to work towards their elimination. Of course, the Movement plays a role in this by encouraging nations which possess nuclear weapons to consider the human cost of using them

⁹ See UN SC Res. 1887, 24 September 2009.

and to do all they can to advance nuclear disarmament, thereby enlarging the network of nuclear-free States.

What other important messages can the Movement pass on to the international community?

Peter Maurer: To pick up on President Konoe's point, we have an interest as a Movement in bringing the discussion on the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons into the arena of concrete negotiations. We have done our homework on that impact and presented it to States. It is now up to States to take over, based on the information we and others have provided to them, and to negotiate a solution. We know what some of the options are: already we have test ban treaties, we have non-proliferation treaties, we have bilateral disarmament arrangements. It may not be one single measure that will bring about complete disarmament, but rather an intelligent combination of different approaches that could bring us forward. Given the efforts that more than 150 States and many civil society organizations put into the Conferences on the Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons over the past three years, we expect these concerns to be taken seriously as States, including those which possess nuclear weapons, reflect constructively on what measures or combination of measures will advance a process that leads to prohibition and total disarmament.

It's vital to avoid a fruitless stalemate where some talk about disarmament and others say that nuclear weapons are still useful, and we cannot actually move forward. We have by nature different perspectives and different approaches which may not be easily reconcilable, but as always in international politics, everything is about timing and motivation. When you disagree about the possibility of the final objective, you can always start with the first step. Every journey starts with a step. We should not aim for a perfect solution immediately. We should encourage more concrete actions that will bring us closer to our objective of total prohibition and disarmament.

Tadateru Konoe: We as a Movement have adopted resolutions and a plan of action, as an appeal to decision-makers to reach an agreement on the abolition of nuclear weapons. Perhaps our voices have not yet reached some decision-makers, and we are using National Societies to do this vis-à-vis their own governments. Some National Societies may consider this issue too sensitive, but this is an issue that is of concern to the entire Movement, and ownership of it must be shared by all the Movement's components. The Conferences on the Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons and other relevant fora have also been good occasions to attract the interest and attention of National Societies and governments at the same time.

Peter Maurer: It's important to recognize that there is no contradiction between engaging a specific humanitarian perspective on nuclear weapons and being pragmatic on how you can achieve their prohibition and elimination. National Societies, the Federation and the ICRC do not pretend that we have the only



Jeff Cooke, ICRC

perspective, but as humanitarian organizations we have to work on the side of humanity. It is unfortunate that progress thus far has been hindered by those who say that from a security perspective we cannot eliminate nuclear weapons because the world is too insecure, because others have them, because they are useful as a deterrent, because terrorists may acquire them, and so on. I respect those arguments. These are the arguments that militaries have to make. But we have done our homework and know from experience the reality of the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons. What I expect from the world's political leaders is that they seriously consider the humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons, particularly in light of the new information and research presented at the conferences held in Oslo, Nayarit and Vienna; that they reassess these weapons in legal and policy terms; and that they take concrete steps to advance nuclear disarmament.

Tadateru Konoe: The argument against disarmament in light of deterrence, still used by some States, was perhaps justified during the Cold War years, when both sides insisted that they needed to defend themselves from each other by possessing nuclear weapons. But now that the Cold War has ended and we are in a much different world where nuclear technology is spreading and there are concerns about the acquisition of nuclear weapons by non-State actors, it is time to treat the prohibition and elimination of nuclear weapons as an urgent international priority. Our Movement can play an important role in emphasizing the humanitarian perspective to further advance the worldwide mobilization to ban nuclear weapons.