NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Atomic bomb survivors, activists gathering in New York

Alice Popovici | May. 3, 2010

Photos by Alice Popovici

NEW YORK
Thousands of peaceful demonstrators marched from Times Square to the United Nations May 2, singing to the beat of drums and waving anti-nuclear banners as they wrapped up a weekend of events leading up to the nonproliferation review conference that opens today. The crowds moved slowly down 42nd Street, past the kebab and pretzel vendors and clusters of tourists, waving at passersby and handing out origami birds.

Hibakusha, survivors of the nuclear attacks in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, now in their 70s and 80s, walked alongside younger generations and carried photographs of the disasters. "No nukes, no war," was printed on a large yellow sheet carried by a delegation from Kyoto, Japan. Behind them, a Korean delegation banner read "End Korean War, sign peace treaty."

Dominican Srs. Carol Gilbert and Ardeth Platte marched with several friends from Pax Christi USA, wearing purple T-shirts and cotton aprons made by grade school children in honor of the rally. The sisters, of the Baltimore, Md. nonviolent resistance community Jonah House, have been active in their protest of nuclear weapons for decades. Several years ago, they spent a few months in county jail as a result of a symbolic missile disarmament action they undertook in 2002, along with a third Dominican nun.

"The abolition of nuclear weapons, for us, has become a responsibility, a moral responsibility under God, and a legal responsibility under the Constitution and under the Nuremberg principles," said Platte, 74. When she learns of a nuclear threat to people in other countries, she said it becomes her duty to stop the crimes.

Gilbert, 62, said she was impressed by the number of young attendees who traveled from Asia and Europe to attend the rally and the conference. Many of these activists, who live in countries where the United States stores its nuclear weapons, such as Turkey, the Netherlands and Belgium, have made their message to this nation clear: "Get your nuclear weapons out of our country."

Conferences to review nuclear nonproliferation have taken place every five years since the treaty, designed to curtail the use of nuclear weapons, was signed by 189 nations in 1970. But the last meeting, in 2005, ended without an agreement on disarmament. As they prepared for this year's meeting, anti-nuclear activists from nearly 30 nations gathered at The Riverside Church on New York City's Upper West Side for two days of learning, planning and discussion. The conference and the march were organized by an international coalition of about 25 organizations.
t

On Saturday evening, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon stood in a large church hall under a giant banner that read "No nukes, no wars," and told attendees that he is honored to address them in the same place where Martin Luther King, Jr. and Nelson Mandela once spoke.
t
"It reminds us that what matters most in life is not the message from the bully pulpit, but rather the message from the people, from people like you. So I say, keep it up," Ki-moon said to a round of applause.

Nuclear disarmament is an "urgent necessity" and "the time for change is now," he continued. The last conference failed to meet expectations, but "we cannot afford to fail again?failure is not an option."

He added that Iran and North Korea's nuclear programs "are of a serious concern to global efforts to curb

proliferation." However, the recent treaty between the U.S. and Russia, under which the nations agreed to reduce their nuclear arsenals, is a step in the right direction.

Tadatoshi Akiba, who is mayor of Hiroshima and former mathematics professor in the U.S., invited audience members to visit his city, tour its museums and meet its residents?and guaranteed that by doing so they will gain "a keener sense of urgency" to abolish nuclear weapons. "Nuclear weapons were designed to do just one thing," he said: "Destroy cities."

He said abolition of nuclear weapons must be achieved within a firm time frame, not at some indefinite point in the future, because there is a debt to be paid to two groups of people. One of them is the older generation of hibakusha (survivors) and the other is the future generation. "Abolition must be done while there are hibakusha still alive," he added.

Earlier in the evening, survivors of nuclear attacks, and others who have been directly affected by nuclear bombs, had shared their stories with several hundred people gathered in one of the church's assembly halls.
t
Junko Kayashige, a small woman with shoulder-length hair, spoke in Japanese and held up a black-and-white photograph, the last one taken of her family in Hiroshima. Another woman read the English translation of her story, which began with the ordinary details of Aug. 6, 1945. Kayashige was listening to music from a record player and watching one of her sisters hang laundry on a clothesline. The next thing she remembers is lying on the ground next to her family, and seeing overturned chairs all around. When she stepped outside, she saw an old woman who was trapped and crying for help.

"As the survivor of the atomic bomb, I am aware that my mission is to take action," she concluded. "Our wisdom must be used for the nuclear abolition."

At first glance, Claudia Peteson, a tall, blonde woman from southern Utah, appears to have little in common with Kayashige. Then she begins to talk about growing up downwind from a nuclear test site in Mercury, Nev., swimming in contaminated waters and eating contaminated fish and fruit. She said she believes radiation from nuclear tests conducted at the Nevada site is responsible for the death of many family members.

One by one, Peterson's father, her young daughter, her sister, her mother-in-law, and her nephew all died from cancer, with no pre-existing family history. Just a few weeks before the conference, she lost her brother-in-law to cancer.

"The U.S. government took great steps to assure us that everything was safe and no harm would come to us," Peterson said. "We watched loved ones die at an alarming rate while the U.S. government continued to deny any wrongdoing."

Natalia Mironova lives in the town of Chelyabinsk in Russia's Ural Mountains, but her story is similar. Though not personally affected by the plutonium plants the government opened in the area in 1949, Mironova said she is acting as a voice for the half million people who live in the contaminated area. Although severe birth defects and brain abnormalities are common in the region as a result of the pollutants, she said medical officials try to keep this information secret.

As she was leaving the peace and music festival which followed the march on Sunday evening, Mironova, a former politician who now studies the role of communities in state management, said the nuclear industry will cease to exist when nuclear weapons are no longer political tools.

"If you want peace you need to learn to negotiate, you need to understand," she said, "and recognize war is a crime."

Popovici is a NCR contributor living in New York.

The Next Step FORWARD [1]

DONATE NOW [1]

Enjoy this article?
Help support more like it by **donating today!** [1]

Source URL (retrieved on *08/31/2015 - 02:40*): http://ncronline.org/news/peace-justice/atomic-bomb-survivors-activists-gathering-new-york

Links:
[1] http://ncrnews.org/webathon/donate/article-end