The History of Radioactive Exposure and U.S.-Japanese Relation

TAKAHASHI Hiroko *

The United States developed atomic bombs and dropped them in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It emphasized how destructive atomic bombs are. It touted the development of nuclear weapons and their use as a “success.”

Immediately after the bombs were dropped in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Japanese government said to its people that there is nothing scary about the “new type of bomb” if people act exactly as they are told to. However externally, through the Swiss government, it denounced the use of the atomic bombs as a violation of international law on the grounds that it is more atrocious than toxic gas.

The Japanese government employed provisions of the Convention (IV) Respecting the Laws and Customs of War on Land, signed in 1907 in The Hague to criticize the atomic bombing. Annex to the Convention’s “Regulations respecting the laws and customs of war on land” says in Article 22 that “the right of belligerents to adopt means of injuring the enemy is not unlimited.” Article 23 said that it is forbidden to employ arms, projectiles, or material calculated to cause unnecessary suffering.” Citing these provisions, the Japanese government condemned the United State that “these bombs, which the United States recently used, surpass toxic gas and all the other weapons that are forbidden because of their indiscriminate and atrocious nature and strictly demanded that it immediately abandon the use of such brutal weapons.

As the Allied occupation of Japan started, the media began to report the fact that people were suffering and being killed even one month after the bombing. People had to struggle with “unnecessary suffering” which against international law.1

* Visiting Researcher of International Peace Research Institute of Meiji Gakuin University and Part-Time Researcher of Japan Legal Institute, Nagoya University. The article is a revised version of the paper presented at the lecture conference entitled “The History of Radioactive Exposure and U.S.-Japanese relation” at “The Series of Symposia for the 70th Anniversary of the End of WWII and 50th Anniversary of the Voting Rights Act” held at Nanzan University on July 4, 2015. I would like to express my deep appreciation for the fruitful comments from Professor Kawashima Masaki and Professor Fujimoto Hiroshi and the symposium participants. My appreciation also goes to Professor Kawashima, Professor Fujimoto, and Staff of American Center of Nanzan University for their invitation and hearty hospitality.
Australian journalist Wilfred Burchett wrote an article entitled “The Atomic Plague” in the London *Daily Express* on September 5, 1945. He wrote as follows: “In Hiroshima, 30 days after the first atomic bomb destroyed the city and shook the world, people are still dying, mysteriously and horribly – people who were uninjured in the cataclysm – from an unknown something which I can only describe as the atomic plague.”

Brigadier General T.F. Farrell, deputy military commander of the Manhattan Project, reacted to the media coverage at a news conference in Tokyo on September 12, 1945. The *New York Times* on September 13, 1945 ran a story headlined “No Radioactivity in Hiroshima Ruin.” It said that Farrell “reported tonight after a survey of blasted Hiroshima that the explosive power of the secret weapon was greater than its inventors envisaged, but that he denied categorically that it produced a dangerous, lingering radioactivity in the ruins of the town or caused a form of poison gas at the moment of explosion.”

Farrell made these remarks at this news conference under the influence of Stafford Warren, Chief of the Manhattan Project’s Medical Section, who had studied the impact of radiation exposure and estimated the extent of radioactive contamination of the area of atomic bombing. Commenting on an estimated impact of the bombing, Warren said that mid-air explosion of an atomic bomb, like the bombs dropped in two Japanese cities, would cause destructive blasts and that blasts and gamma and neutron beams have lethal effects. He also said that dangerous fissionable materials just went up into the stratosphere and were dispersed by the blowing wind. His conclusion was that people may return to their homes as the city would not be contaminated with dangerous substances.

Warren had explained this viewpoint to Farrell back in September 1945. But the statement by Farrell was inaccurate. According to many statements by A-bomb survivors in concerted lawsuits, their health problems were caused by exposure to atomic bomb’s residual radiation.

In the early 1950s, the U.S. Atomic Bomb Casualty Commission (ABCC) surveyed people who entered the cities after the atomic bombings. However, this project ended in 1953 without enough research. The U.S. government continued to deny or play down the impact of residual radioactivity or internal exposure in its official statements. But it is now clear from relevant U.S. documents that what

---

the U.S. government has given as its official view has no credibility.

The question here is why the U.S. government surveyed the survivors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and of the Marshall Islands even though it had officially underestimated the impact of radiation exposure.

It is because the U.S. sought to collect data that would be useful in case of a World War III. Colonel A. W. Oughterson, Medical Corps, U.S. Army, Pacific, described the significance of the “study on casualties caused by the effect of atomic bombs” in a letter he sent to Guy Denit on August 28, 1945. He said that a study of the effects of the two atomic bombs used in Japan was very important to our country (the United States). He also said that such a unique opportunity may not come again until the next world war. In June 1950, the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) announced that ABCC would continue the study of Japanese atomic bomb survivors, namely A-bomb survivors in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It said, “The Japanese survivors make up the only group of human beings in the world who have been exposed to an atomic bomb burst. For this reason, the medical findings of the ABCC have important significance for scientists and for military and civil defense planning in the United States.” This statement made it clear how important the radiation effect research was to military and civil defense in the United States. In fact, a pamphlet distributed as part of the civil defense project said that the chance of surviving a nuclear attack is higher than you might think, because the power of the bombs is limited, citing that a little more than half of the population within a mile, or 1.6 km from the epicenter in Hiroshima still alive. It even argued that radiation from atomic bombings was not as horrible as blasts or heat, except for explosion under water or on the ground, adding that the danger of first exposure to radiation would last only one minute. It is appalling that this pamphlet emphasized the fact that more than half of the population in a given area survived instead of noting the fact that nearly half of the population died. In its propaganda campaign, the U.S. totally ignored the effect of residual radiation that was emitted one minute after the detonation.

The U.S. government covered up the radioactive contamination while conducting thorough survey on people in the Marshall Islands and the U.S. service personnel after the revelation of massive radioactive impact shown in the crew of Daigo Fukuryu Maru by the radioactive fallout triggered by a hydrogen bomb experiment in Bikini Atoll on March 1, 1954. The U.S. government launched another nuclear experiment at Nevada test site for civil defense purpose, inviting

---


civilians and media in May, 1954. Then, they launched a new propaganda campaign to ask citizens to buy nuclear shelters for radioactive fallout.\(^8\)

In 1957, the U.S. President Dwight Eisenhower set up his science advisory committee known as the Gaither panel to consider constructing nuclear shelters in case of radioactive fallout. On November 7, 1957, the panel submitted to the president a classified report entitled “Deterrence and Survival in the Nuclear Age.” It recommended the funding $22.5 billion to construct new nuclear shelters.\(^9\) Eisenhower said he would not publish the report’s estimate on the grounds that he feared that the public might panic. Vice President Richard Nixon argued that security of the U.S. hinges not on civil defense but on active defense using nuclear deterrence, saying there was no difference between 30 million deaths and 50 million deaths from the viewpoint of the nation’s survival. They knew that there was no means of protecting citizens if nuclear war breaks out. That is why they adamantly argued for “nuclear deterrence”, which was supposed to prevent nuclear war by means of threats.\(^10\) This is a notion that nuclear weapons could be used as a card in international politics because of its significant role as deterrent. However, I believe that such rhetoric that has been proliferated is the real problem, rather than nuclear proliferation itself.

The policy of depending on the nuclear umbrella, the theory of nuclear deterrence and the use of nuclear energy are serving as sources of pro-nuclear notions. Therefore many nuclear victims have been kept out of the public eye. This has been made possible by the fact that the U.S. government that developed and used atomic bombs not only boasted of these “successes”, but also succeeded in covering up their brutal impact and damage, clearly in violation of international law.

The influence of nuclear weapons or radiation effects was underestimated and propagated by politicians and scientists who have been involved in nuclear weapons development or in human radiation experiments for the development of radiation weapons. To take the first modest step toward abolishing nuclear weapons, it is important to make known to the public that the nuclear weapon is not something that merely exerts destructive power or political card to threaten the other side but that it brings about tragic consequences indiscriminately, especially on growing children and unborn children.

---

8. Ibid.
10. NSC 5807/1, “Measures to Carry Out the Concept of Shelter,” April 2, 1958.