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When was your first visit to Hiroshima? What were your impressions and what stands out most about the visit in your memory?

Hiroshima holds a special meaning for me. On August 6, 2002, I had the privilege and responsibility of representing Secretary General Kofi Annan at the ceremony commemorating the atomic bombing of Hiroshima in 1945. The commemoration is at once haunting, sombre and soul-cleansing. About 40,000 people assembled in the sultry heat to recall the searing, dazzling blast that announced the birth of the atomic age with the death of more than 100,000 people at one stroke and the horror-filled stories of the larger number of survivors.

What gives you the deepest fears, and what gives you the greatest hopes for a peaceful world?

Deepest fear? On August 6, 1945, “on a bright, cloudless morning, death fell from the sky and the world was changed. A flash of light and a wall of fire destroyed a city and demonstrated that mankind possessed the means to destroy itself” — President Barack Obama, Hiroshima Peace Memorial, 27 May 2016. My deepest fear is that humanity will indeed destroy itself.

Reason for hope? Against this, the story of Hiroshima offers hope for the future. The bomb’s first successful test, Trinity, was carried out on July 16 at the White Sands Missile Range.

Witnessing that, J Robert Oppenheimer, the “father of atomic bomb,” famously recalled the sacred Hindu text the Bhagavad Gita: “If the radiance of a thousand suns were to burst at once into the sky, that would be like the splendor of the mighty one.” Of course, birth and death are symbiotically linked in the cycle of life. So Oppenheimer recalled too the matching verse from the Gita: “Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds.” The same duality is omnipresent in every aspect of Hiroshima.



Trinity Site Detonation

What role can Hiroshima and the hibaku jumoku play to help achieve nuclear disarmament?

Hiroshima’s history of destruction, recovery and resurrection suggests that we shall find redemption in the recognition of our common humanity. Hiroshima, once again a beautiful, scenic and thriving city, lives by three codes: To forgive and atone, but never to forget; for this to never happen again; and transformation from a military city to one of peace. It’s rare to find former enemies join in common atonement of a shared human tragedy. Yet that surely is what Hiroshima symbolizes. The citizens of Hiroshima, in rebuilding their city, have consecrated it as a testimonial to social resilience, human solidarity and nuclear abolition.

We need a multiphased roadmap towards abolition of nuclear weapons that prioritizes concrete immediate steps in the first couple of years such as introducing more robust firewalls to separate possession from use of nuclear weapons; further significant cuts in existing nuclear arsenals and a freeze on production of fissile materials in the medium term of up to three years; a verifiable and enforceable new international nuclear weapons convention within a target time frame of about five years; and their total and verified destruction in 10 to 20 years.