ASIA-PACIFIC LEADERSHIP NETWORK
FOR NUCLEAR NON-PROLIFERATION AND DISARMAMENT

YOUTH AND THE GENERATION OF GLOBAL HIBAKUSHAS

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80 years have passed since the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. 80 years to reckon with the horrors, to learn, to reflect, and to change course. 80 years too long to still be living under the shadow of the bomb – yet here we are. 80 later, and still not enough.

With the global nuclear arms control frameworks deteriorating and disarmament efforts stalled, the world stands at a dangerous crossroads. The Elders have warned about the growing mistrust among nuclear powers, and have called for renewed nuclear dialogue. Their concern is echoed by leading policy experts who caution that the collapse of key treaties, modernisation of arsenals, and the breakdown of diplomatic norms are paving the way for a new, potentially more volatile nuclear arms race. The Doomsday Clock now stands at 89 seconds to midnight, the closest it has ever been, underscoring the existential danger we face. All signs point to the same conclusion—without immediate and sustained action aimed at rebuilding international cooperation, the world edges closer to nuclear catastrophe, threatening not only global security but the very survival of humanity.

The 80-Year-Old Legacy

Hibakusha, or atomic bomb survivors, are living witnesses to the catastrophic human cost of nuclear weapons. Their testimonies carry the weight of the collective memory of radiation sickness, loss of loved ones, and the stigma that followed. Today, they are known for their unwavering resilience and strength, using their lived experience to call for a world free of nuclear weapons.

However, not all victims of the nuclear age have received the same recognition or policy attention. Since 1945, over 2,000 nuclear weapons have been detonated, exposing millions to radioactive fallout across borders and generations. According to historian Robert Jacobs, a nuclear weapon was detonated every 8.6 days between 1946 and 1989, with nuclear weapons exploding on every continent except South America and Antarctica. From the Pacific Islands to Central Asia, entire communities were exposed to radiation, resulting in elevated cancer rates, genetic damage, psychological trauma, and long-term environmental contamination. Millions more have suffered from exposure linked to

nuclear weapons production and accidents. These individuals form the broader community of global hibakusha – victims of nuclear harm whose experiences remain largely overlooked in policy discourse.

Global Hibakusha

From Nigeria to the Navajo Nation, from Kazakhstan to Jaduguda in India, the global legacy of nuclear weapons testing, uranium mining, and radioactive waste disposal has created a quiet emergency. In the United States, Downwinders in Utah and Nevada have suffered from elevated cancer rates due to atmospheric testing in the 1950s and '60s. Marshallese residents were displaced from their ancestral lands and atolls, and continue to face intergenerational health effects from the Marshall Islands being used as a US nuclear weapons test site between 1946 and 1958. In Algeria, French nuclear testing in the Sahara brought about radioactive contamination, with the local Tuareg populations continuing to claim birth abnormalities and inexplicable diseases. When the British tested on their lands in the 1950s, Australia's Aboriginal peoples were never made aware of the risks. For decades, tribal populations in India's Jadugoda region have claimed malformations, miscarriages, and poisoned water supplies from uranium mines.

The geographic footprint of nuclear harm is not coincidental; it is colonial. Historically, nuclear weapons have disproportionately affected indigenous and marginalized groups and their territories, depriving residents of political agency, denying sincere consent, and deeming them expendable in the goal of strategic or technological superiority.

Despite their immense suffering, these communities are largely excluded from international nuclear justice frameworks. Most receive little to no compensation, medical care, or environmental remediation. Their suffering has rarely been factored into global nuclear policy, which largely focuses on nonproliferation and deterrence rather than human consequences. This highlights a broader failure of global governance, one that stems from nuclear exceptionalism. By involving affected populations in disarmament discussions, expanding victim assistance initiatives, and holding nuclear powers accountable for past and ongoing harm, the international community can actively address this legacy. Anything less erodes the legitimacy of global security norms and undermines our shared values as global citizens.

Inheriting nuclear anxieties

As a generation, we have inherited a perpetual fear of living in the shadow of nuclear weapons, whereby nuclear threats are diffuse, unpredictable, and disturbingly normalised. We wake up to headlines about states threatening nuclear escalation and recognise that a single detonation might set off a devastating domino effect across regions and alliances. This ongoing backdrop of nuclear insecurity is no longer abstract. It is immediate, lived, and deeply intertwined with colonialism, environmental injustice, and systemic inequality.

Across sectors, young people are actively questioning the historical structures that enabled their development and are amplifying the voices of communities disproportionately impacted by their legacy. We do not view nuclear weapons in isolation, but as part of a broader web of systemic injustices to be addressed through a multidimensional, intersectional lens. Young academicians are producing interdisciplinary research that links nuclear policy to environmental justice, colonial history, racial inequality, and public health. In civil society and advocacy, we are building coalitions that connect nuclear disarmament with climate action, indigenous rights, and anti-colonial movements. In policy spaces, we are calling for inclusive governance, transparency, and reparative measures.

The question is no longer whether change is needed, but who will act and when.

The opinions articulated above represent the views of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Asia-Pacific Leadership Network or any of its members.

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The **Asia-Pacific Leadership Network (APLN)** is a Seoul-based organization and network of political, military, diplomatic leaders, and experts from across the Asia-Pacific region, working to address global security challenges, with a particular focus on reducing and eliminating nuclear weapons risks. The mission of APLN is to inform and stimulate debate, influence action, and propose policy recommendations designed to address regional security threats, with an emphasis on nuclear and other WMD (weapon of mass destruction) threats, and to do everything possible to achieve a world in which nuclear weapons and other WMDs are contained, diminished, and eventually eliminated.


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