

HIROSHIMA TREE PLANTING CEREMONY

Remarks by Professor the Hon Gareth Evans, Chancellor of The Australian National University, Crawford School of Public Policy, ANU, Canberra, 21 July 2016

My first visit to Hiroshima was for me, as it has been for so many others, a life-changing event. I was a 20 year old student, on my first overseas trip, and I remember vividly the emotion of that day, particularly as I stood in front of one particular exhibit in the Peace Park Museum: a granite block, part of the front steps of an office building, against which someone had been sitting in the sun when the bomb exploded early in that August morning. Starkly visible on the stone was the shadow of that man or woman, indelibly etched there by the crystallization of the granite around his or her body as it was, in an instant, incinerated by that terrible blast.

We know why, and can understand why, the US Government made the decision to drop that bomb: to try to bring a speedy end to a terrible war, and avoid the deaths and suffering of hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions more – although the testimony of history is now increasingly clear that another factor, the entry of the Soviet Union into the war against Japan that same week, was the more decisive factor.

But however defensible the intent, the bombing of Hiroshima, and Nagasaki, marked a catastrophic turn for the worse in the history of humanity. Not only did we see the birth of the most indiscriminately inhumane weapons ever invented, we saw the birth of a weapon the use of which could destroy life on this planet as we know it.

I, like Ramesh Thakur – with whom I have worked closely in establishing the ANU Centre for Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament which heads -- and some others here, have devoted a good part of my public and professional life to trying to eliminate nuclear weapons from the face of the earth.

- Joining President Obama in his fervent wish, so memorably articulated in Hiroshima in May this year, that “we must have the courage to escape the logic of fear, and pursue a world without them”.
- Joining Prime Minister Abe in his own determination, also memorably expressed on that day, “to realise a world free of nuclear weapons, however long and difficult the road will be”.
- And joining those hard-headed Cold War realists Henry Kissinger, George Shultz, Bill Perry and Sam Nunn in their judgement that whatever stabilising role Mutually Assured Destruction may or may not have played in the Cold War, in the world of today the risks associated with the possession by anyone of nuclear weapons far outweigh any possible rewards.

In words of the 1996 Canberra Commission, so often repeated since, ‘So long has any state has nuclear weapons others will want them. So long as any nuclear weapons remain they are bound one day to be used, by accident or misadventure if not design. And any such use would be catastrophic for life on this planet as we know it’.

Making progress on nuclear disarmament is a slow, grinding, frustrating, unrewarding process – and with the present state of the world global zero seems as far away as it has ever

been, notwithstanding all the hopes generated by President Obama's intellectual, moral and emotional commitment when he came into office in 2009.

But it is an effort that must continue, for the survival of humanity depends on it. The crucial thing is to keep the flame of hope alight, not just in big diplomatic ways, but in a myriad of small ways: taking steps to keep the memory of Hiroshima alive, and to keep alive the idea that out of the ashes of Hiroshima a better and more humane world can indeed grow.

That is the core idea behind this tree-planting today – part of a world-wide exercise planting, in appropriate sites around the world, seeds or saplings from Hiroshima's A-bombed survivor trees.

This tree will be a constant reminder to passers-by -- and in our case, very appropriately, many successive generations of students of public policy at this great national university of ours -- not only of the horror of what occurred in August 1945, but what can be regenerated, what can grow out of that horror. President Obama talked in Hiroshima of us choosing "a future in which Hiroshima and Nagasaki are known not as the dawn of atomic warfare, but as the start of our own moral awakening".

I know that all of you here share that hope, and wish for a safer and saner nuclear-free world, and thank you for joining us in this ceremony.

I would like to acknowledge and celebrate the First Australians on whose traditional lands we meet, and pay my respects to the elders of the Ngunnawal people past and present.

Distinguished guests, colleagues,

The single word 'Hiroshima' is an instantly recognisable symbol of the horrors of war and the utter devastation and desolation of nuclear war in particular. No amount of reading about the event can prepare one for the emotional impact of actually visiting the city and the A dome. The tragedy hits you in the gut with an unexpected intimacy when you visit the museum. In turn the museum is inadequate preparation for the poignancy of the moving commemoration of the atomic bombing every year on 6 August, when the living gather in Hiroshima to atone for the dead.

On 6 August 2002, I represented Secretary-General Kofi Annan in Hiroshima. The commemorative ceremony is at once haunting, sombre and soul-cleansing. Tens of thousands of people assemble in the sultry heat to recall the searing, dazzling blast that announced the birth of the atomic age with the death of a hundred thousand people at one stroke, and the horror-filled stories of the larger number of survivors.

The cenotaph memorializing the bombing is set in a beautiful peace park. The names of the victims are inscribed on the arc-shaped cenotaph which stands atop a reflecting pool. The park is framed at one end by the Atomic Bomb dome, a structure that survived the blast in skeleton form and today functions as one of the most iconic and recognisable images of the horrors of atomic weapons.

At the other end of the park is the Peace Museum that houses various memorabilia and displays. Again, it is difficult not to be shocked into contemplation of human frailty and folly by many of the images and items, for example spectacles that fused onto facial bones in the intense heat of the radiation.

And yet, not all life was destroyed permanently. Some of the flora sprouted afresh. A branch of UNITAR opened an office in Hiroshima and its inaugural director was a friend of mine, the Iranian-American Nassrine Azimi. She fell in love with the city, continued living there on retirement, and in 2011 launched the Green Legacy Hiroshima Initiative. This global volunteer campaign, which retains a connection with UNITAR, aims to disseminate the universal message of trees that survived the atomic bombing, promoting the dual message of warning in relation to the dangers of nuclear weapons, and hope in the form of nature's resilience.

The tree we plant today is a direct descendant of those 1945 survivor trees.

The citizens of Hiroshima, in rebuilding their city, have consecrated it as a testimonial to social resilience, human solidarity and nuclear abolition. Hiroshima, once again a beautiful, scenic and thriving city, lives by three codes: To forgive and atone, but never to forget; never again; and transformation from a military city to a city of peace.

Reinforcing and deepening that message, this tree – an outpost in Canberra of a global movement – will stand as a symbol of hope, redemption, regeneration and renewal.

To tell us more, may I invite the ANU Chancellor Professor Gareth Evans to say a few words.