

International

Japan marks 75th anniversary of Hiroshima atomic bombing

‘We must never allow this painful past to repeat itself’

HIROSHIMA: Japan yesterday marked 75 years since the world's first atomic bomb attack, with the coronavirus pandemic forcing a scaling back of ceremonies to remember the victims. Survivors, relatives and a handful of foreign dignitaries attended this year's main event in Hiroshima to pray for those killed or wounded in the bombing and call for world peace. But the general public was kept away, with the ceremony - instead broadcast online.

Participants, many of them dressed in black and wearing face masks, offered a silent prayer at exactly 8:15 am, the time the first nuclear weapon used in wartime was dropped over the city. Speaking afterwards, Hiroshima mayor Kazumi Matsui warned against the nationalism that led to World War II and urged the world to come together to face global threats, like the coronavirus pandemic.

“We must never allow this painful past to repeat itself. Civil society must reject self-centered nationalism and unite against all threats,” he said. Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, who has been criticized by some for his attempts to revise a key pacifist clause of the country's constitution, pledged in his address to “do my best for the realisation of a world without nuclear weapons and peace for all time”.

And UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres, who addressed the gathering by video message because of the pandemic, warned that “the only way to totally eliminate nuclear risk is to totally eliminate nuclear weapons”. The bomb attack on Hiroshima killed around 140,000 people, many of them instantly, with others perishing in the weeks and months that followed, suffering radiation sickness, devastating burns and other in-

juries. Three days later, the United States dropped a second atomic bomb on Nagasaki, where 74,000 people were killed.

‘No one can escape’

Many of the traditionally sombre events to mark the anniversary have been cancelled because of the pandemic, a global threat that carries an all-too-familiar fear for some survivors, including 83-year-old Keiko Ogura, who lived through the Hiroshima bombing. With the outbreak of the virus, “I recall the fear I felt right after the bombing... no one can escape”, she told



Bomb attack on Hiroshima killed around 140,000

journalists last month. She too urged people around the world to recognize the need to fight common challenges as one. “Whether it's the coronavirus or nuclear weapons, the way to overcome it is through solidarity among mankind,” she said. The landmark anniversary this year underscores the dwindling number of bomb survivors, known in Japan as “hibakusha”, many of whom suffered physically and psychologically after the attack.

Those who remain were mostly infants or young children at the time, and their work to keep the memory of the bombings alive and call

The blast killed more than 110 people, wounded thousands and compounded public anger that erupted in protests last year against a government seen as corrupt and inefficient. “We're trying to fix this country. We've been trying to fix it for nine months but now we're going to do it our way,” said Fadlallah. “If we had a real state, it would have been in the street since last night cleaning and working. Where are they?”

‘Even a smile’

A few civil defense workers could be seen examining building structures but they were vastly outnumbered by young volunteers flooding the streets to help. In small groups, they energetically swept up glass beneath blown-out buildings, dragging them into plastic bags. Others clambered up debris-strewn stairwells to offer their homes to residents who had spent the previous night in the open air. “We're sending people into the damaged homes of the elderly and handicapped to help them find a home for tonight,” said Husam Abu Nasr, a 30-year-old volunteer. “We don't have a state to take these steps, so we took matters into our own hands,” he said.

Towns across the country have offered to host Beirut families with damaged homes and the Maronite Catholic patriarchate announced it would open its monasteries and religious schools to those needing shelter. Food was quickly taken care of, too: plastic tables loaded with donated water bottles, sandwiches and snacks were set up within hours. “I can't help by carrying things, so we brought food,



HIROSHIMA: Hiroshima mayor Kazumi Matsui (right) and representatives of bereaved families take part in a ceremony at the Memorial Cenotaph during the 75th anniversary memorial service for atomic bomb victims at the Peace Memorial Park in Hiroshima yesterday. — AFP

for a ban on nuclear weapons has taken on increasing urgency as they age. Activists and survivors have created archives of everything from the recorded testimony of hibakusha to their poems and drawings. But many fear interest in the bombings is fading as they recede beyond the horizon of lived experience and into history.

‘Unspeakable horror’

“Just storing a pile of records... is meaningless,” said Kazuhisa Ito, the secretary general of No More Hibakusha Project, an NGO that com-

piles documents and testimonial accounts from survivors. “What we want is to engage young people with this issue and exchange views with them, globally,” he told AFP. The historical assessment of the bombings remains the subject of some controversy. The United States has never apologized for the bombings, which many see as having brought an end to the war. Japan announced its surrender just days later on August 15, 1945, and some historians argue the bombings ultimately saved lives by avoiding a land invasion that might have been significantly more deadly. — AFP

water, chocolate and moral support,” said Rita Ferzli, 26. “I think everyone should be here helping, especially young people. No one should be sitting at home—even a smile is helping right now.”

‘This is it’

Business owners swiftly took to social media, posting offers to repair doors, paint damaged walls or replace shattered windows for free. Abdo Amer, who owns window company Curtain Glass, said he was moved to make such an offer after narrowly surviving the blast. “I had driven by the port just three minutes earlier,” the 37-year-old said. He offered to replace windows for half the price, but said he was fixing some for free given the devastating situation for many families following the Lebanese currency's staggering devaluation in recent months. “I've gotten more than 7,000 phone calls today and I can't keep up,” said the father of four. “You think the state will take up this work? Actually, let them step down and leave.”

Outrage at the government was palpable among volunteers, many of whom blamed government officials for failing to remove explosive materials left at the port for years. “They're all sitting in their chairs in the AC while people are wearing themselves out in the street,” said Mohammad Suyur, 30, as he helped sweep on Wednesday. “The last thing in the world they care about is this country and the people who live in it.” He said activists were preparing to reignite the protest movement that launched in October. “We can't bear more than this. This is it. The whole system has got to go,” he said. — AFP

‘State, what state?’ Lebanese together in solidarity and rage

BEIRUT: In Beirut's beloved bar districts, hundreds of young Lebanese ditched beers for brooms on Wednesday to sweep debris in the absence of a state-sponsored cleanup operation following a deadly blast. “What state?” scoffed 42-year-old Melissa Fadlallah, a volunteer cleaning up the hard-hit Mar Mikhail district of the Lebanese capital. The explosion, which hit just a few hundred meters away at Beirut's port, blew all the windows and doors off Mar Mikhail's pubs, restaurants and apartment homes on Tuesday.

By Wednesday, a spontaneous cleanup operation was underway there, a glimmer of youthful solidarity and hope after a devastating night. Wearing plastic gloves and a mask, Fadlallah tossed a shard of glass as long as her arm at the door of the state electricity company's administrative building that looms over the district. “For me, this state is a dump—and on behalf of yesterday's victims, the dump that killed them is going to stay a dump,” she told AFP.