The City of Hiroshima’s annual Peace Declaration, delivered by Mayor Matsui Kazumi on August 6, 2021, set the tone for the observance of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Oak Ridge and Knoxville this year.

After recalling the death, destruction, and suffering wrought by the US bombing of Hiroshima seventy-six years ago, the Mayor said: “Furthermore, in accordance with the will of the hibakusha, I demand the immediate signing and ratification of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, then constructive participation in the first Meeting of States Parties.”

In the Age of the Ban Treaty, there is no looking back without looking forward.

Names and Remembrance

In the pre-dawn hours, as long lines of workers’ trucks (and a few cars) headed into the Y-12 Nuclear Weapons Complex in Oak Ridge, OREPA members began the three hour Names and Remembrance Ceremony.

Names of victims of Hiroshima were read aloud, followed by the deep peal of a peace bell, and a crane was tied to the fence—an hour passed, and more than a hundred cranes in all the colors of the rainbow danced on the gentle breeze.

The readings continued. Eyewitness accounts told of the incomprehensible scenes of suffering; poetry captured the pain that sterile accounts could not. The words of General Eisenhower and
Admiral Leahy stood in stark contrast to the decision to obliterate the city of Hiroshima and tens of thousands of its citizens—the military men said the bomb was not necessary to end the war, was barbaric, and recounted how they were ignored when they made their arguments to the politicians.

At 8:15 the reading was suddenly broken, mid-sentence. The bomb had exploded over Hiroshima. Several hundred cranes lined the fence in a silence that extended for minutes; the images of Hiroshima and its unfathomable loss and sorrow held sway.

And then, slowly and solemnly, we came back to the present, nudged by the drumming and chanting of Utsumi and Denise from the Great Smoky Mountains Peace Pagoda and the Nipponzan Myohoji order.

By 9:00, more than three hundred cranes remained behind to bear witness at Y-12, where the uranium fuel for the Little Boy bomb was enriched. We gathered our chairs and packed up.

Within ten minutes of our departure, the cranes were gone—torn down and disposed of by Y-12 security.

It seems the simple paper cranes, representing the desire for peace, posed a threat to the bomb plant, their presence sending an intolerable message to the workers who, by now, were back at their daily task—producing thermonuclear cores for nuclear weapons.

OREPA’s newsletter is printed four times a year in Knoxville, Tennessee and published on-line at orepa.org.

Contributions to OREPA’s work may be sent to P O Box 5743, Oak Ridge, TN 37831 or may be made securely on-line at OREPA’s web site: www.orepa.org.
At Y-12 we read aloud portions of the Treaty, and then we crossed the road to the fence surrounding the bomb plant and we placed 150 Yellow Xs, each one a demand for the abolition of nuclear weapons, on the fence.

Following the action, we remembered our colleagues from the Kings Bay Plowshares seven who remain in federal prison and we sang, “Keep Your Eyes on the Prize (Hold On)” before leaving the site.

**PEACE LANTERNS**

Later on Saturday, as dusk descended, we gathered in the field at Sequoia Hills Park in Knoxville, several dozen people, for the Peace Lantern Ceremony, remembering Nagasaki and expressing our commitment to work for passage of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons and against violence in all the corners of our lives and world.

Japanese dancers in vibrant, beautiful kimonos and formal dress led us in a Japanese folk dance to the strains of Tokyo Ohdo, accompanied by a shamisen (similar to a lute) and small taiko (drum).

Recorder music provided the perfect setting as the peace lanterns were released into the Tennessee River, first drifting upstream before turning to form a long line of hope as they floated away.

Left: Peace Lantern construction began with the creation of wrappers for the lanterns on the porch at the Riverside Catholic Worker house in Knoxville; it continued inside with assembly of the bases.

Right: at the Lantern Ceremony, we remembered Nagasaki and heard the hibakusha demand for nuclear disarmament; we also learned a traditional dance to the tune of Tokyo Ohdo. And as the evening drew to a close, we experienced peace and hope as lanterns cast light in the darkness.
As bomb buildings age, danger increases, budgets go up, and schedules slip

If you read the Defense Nuclear Facilities Safety Board weekly reports about the Y-12 Nuclear Weapons Complex in Oak Ridge, TN, you get the idea that no one, really, has a grasp on what is going on in the nuclear weapons production buildings.

Week after week, without fail, nuclear criticality problems are uncovered and documented. Chip dollys are found to be leaking; containers are found to contain more radioactive materials than allowed; unlabeled jars with liquids containing highly enriched uranium are discovered. Safety problems extend beyond criticality safety limits allow was sitting in a corner in one of the buildings at Y-12. No one knew it, no one was monitoring it, no one was attending to it.

Question: What else? The drum discovery is not, unfortunately, an anomaly. "Discoveries" are the way problems are routinely uncovered. This is the result of decades of failure to attend to a safe and responsible process for handling and tracking weapons-grade, life-threatening, highly radioactive materials.

All of this time, of course, NNSA officials at Y-12 have been assuring the public that safety is their top priority.

Not just HEU

Y-12’s nuclear weapons production safety problems extend beyond criticality safety issues. A report issued in August by the Government Accountability Office found that on-going work to assure the production of lithium-6 which, when combined with deuterium, is an essential component of thermonuclear weapons, is “not consistent with best practices.”

One result of this kind of program mismanagement can be seen in another part of the GAO report—the projected cost of a new lithium processing facility (LPF) at Y-12 has tripled in just four years, while the estimated completion date has slipped five years.

These last findings will shock no one who tracks major construction projects across the Department of Energy’s weapons complex. These projects, which tend to make annual appearances on GAO’s high-risk list, are often “low-balled” at the outset in order to start the flow of money from Congress. Then, once hundreds of millions are invested in the project, the real budgets begin to appear, and contractors come running to the feed trough.

The assumption that the US needs an ongoing supply of lithium deuteride in order to maintain a massive nuclear stockpile of 1,500 deployed weapons, with 4,000 more in reserve, is not so simple.

The “need” for a new lithium facility arises from two facts—one is a done deal, and the other is an assumption. The done deal is simple; the old lithium wet chemistry facility, necessary to recycle lithium from retired warheads, was shut down in 2013 because it had deteriorated beyond the point that it could operate safely.

The assumption—that the US needs an ongoing supply of lithium deuteride in order to maintain its massive nuclear stockpile of 1,500 deployed weapons and around 4,000 more in reserve—is not so simple.

Apply any one of several other assumptions—that the US will dramatically reduce its stockpile in compliance with its 1970 obligations under the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, or that the US will sign and begin to implement the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, or that the Nuclear Posture Review underway by the Biden Administration will reduce the nation’s reliance on nuclear weapons as a strategic security measure, or even that the Biden Administration will negotiate another new START agreement with Russia that will result in steep reductions—any one of these assumptions reduces or eliminates the need for a new lithium facility currently priced at $1.6 billion. (If it is built, the ultimate pricetag will be much higher.)

In the meantime

Deteriorating conditions at Y-12’s Building 9212, the weapons production facility cited almost weekly by the DNFSB for criticality safety issues, are similar to the conditions that forced shutdown of the wet chemistry lithium facility in 2013. But 9212 is in some ways worse—not only is the physical infrastructure deteriorating from age and exposure to corrosive materials over nearly seventy years, the building has legacy risks lurking in dark corners throughout, any one of which could turn into a catastrophe if, say, a strong storm compromised the weak roof and allowed water to enter the building.

OREPA has asked several oversight agencies, including the DNFSB and GAO, to develop a tool to systematically catalogue conditions at Y-12’s bomb production facilities and to establish a “failure point,” a point at which the risk of building or production failure requires shutting down the facility in order to protect workers and the public.

Here again, the lithium situation is instructive. The GAO report includes a 2014 photograph of an area of the lithium facility that was shut down in 2013; the photo shows where a 300 pound slab of concrete fell from the ceiling of the building.

When we remarked to one official that we felt like a broken record, they agreed: different material, different buildings, same story.

And so, bomb production continues, billions are spent, and the risk grows greater every day.
The Ban Treaty is only words on paper until we make it more.

The first and most important thing we can do is simple and hard: we have to take the existential threat of nuclear weapons seriously—and act as though it were real. Because it is.

It’s not just that there are thousands of nuclear weapons threatening us—that’s been true for decades.

But two things have changed. First, the nuclear powers have launched a new nuclear arms race—the US, China, and Russia are investing trillions of dollars in “modernizing” their nuclear weaponry. Right now, the US is outspending China three to one, and Russia four to one. This nuclear arms race is ours—we started it and we are driving it forward.

The second thing that has changed is that the nine nuclear weapons states no longer own the debate about nuclear weapons. The Ban Treaty has changed that.

So the second, and equally important thing we can do is also simple and hard: we have to take the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons seriously.

Until recently, those who spoke about nuclear abolition were marginalized, cut out of policy debates and discussions in favor of those who limited discussion of nukes to military policy, nuclear postures, and used terms like “mutually assured destruction” and “deterrence.” Nuclear weapons were about security, oxymoronic as that is.

The one hundred twenty-two nations that voted to approve the Ban Treaty in 2017 have declared that nuclear weapons must be talked about in terms that matter most to the nearly eight billion people who live on the planet—the impact of nuclear weapons on human beings and the environment that sustains life of the planet.

Seen through this lens, nuclear weapons are clearly not only immoral, but, thanks to the Ban Treaty, also illegal, violating the fundamental standards of common humanitarian law.

The legal power of the Treaty is not universal. It applies only to the states that have joined the Treaty. This list of 55 does not, of course, include any of the nuclear weapons states. Nor does it include their protectorates—nations that are covered by our “nuclear umbrella.”

But the moral power of the Treaty does not see national or state boundaries; it has force across the globe, including—and especially—in the nuclear weapons states.

That power rests not only on the insistence of signatories to the Treaty that their lives matter, and that they can not conscionably be subjected to the effects of nuclear war; it rests also on the powerful claim of the hibakusha, Pacific Islanders, and other downwinders who have already experienced the deadly and lasting effects of nuclear weapons.

These witnesses, whose compelling voices must be heard by world leaders, are united in their direct message: Never Again! And they know that the only way to assure that no one else is ever subject to the horrors they have witnessed is to dismantle the nuclear weapons under the terms of the Ban Treaty.

Using the power

The TPNW is words on paper or on a screen, strong and clear and insistent words, but still only words. They have no power unless they are taken up and used.

That’s where we come in. The TPNW opens the door for conversations and actions, and there are Working Groups strategizing right now about the most effective actions we can take to turn the Treaty’s promise into reality.

Some things are already happening. Resources were developed and used across the country for Hiroshima and Nagasaki observances.

A bill before the US House of Representatives (H.R. 2850), sponsored by Eleanor Holmes-Norton, calls for the US to sign and ratify the TPNW—it lacks enough sponsors to pass, but it is a perfect vehicle for contacting your Representative and asking them to sign on to the bill. Even if you feel certain they will not sign on to the bill, your conversation will compel them to think about nuclear weapons, something they rarely if ever do.

You can also use the bill as an organizing tool—a chance to talk to other people to ask them to contact their Representative. Leaving a message on-line is simple; calling them is even more effective.

Raising the profile of nuclear weapons helps people to understand the threat is real, even if we don’t want to face it. Creating a grounds swell that might nudge a Representative to think about this issue is also an important and critical action.

The decision-makers will never embrace the Treaty or move toward abolition on their own. They will do it only when they are pushed to do it by us. As the Emancipators sang at Y-12, “There’s work to be done!”
OPPORTUNITIES FOR ACTION

Around the country this August, Hiroshima and Nagasaki observances tied the commemorations to the Ban Treaty. In the weeks to come, we will begin organize collaborative events to mark the first anniversary of the Treaty’s entry into force on January 22.

You can track the progress of this effort by joining the Facebook group: Nuclear Ban Treaty Days of Action. This site provided resources for August observances and is collecting accounts of actions around the US; it will remain an active site, rolling forward to support future days of action.

Better yet, you can join the Days of Action Working Group and work with people around the country to shape events, develop themes, create resources, and more. You’ll have the inside track and can share information with your local group to be out in front of preparations.

Other opportunities are already in place—ICAN’s Don’t Bank on the Bomb project provides information on companies, financial institutions and other investors in nuclear weapons production. Several campaigns are already underway in the United States to press companies and banks and universities to give up contracts or divest from nuclear weapons production. There is a Divestment Working Group sharing ideas and exploring possibilities for a broader campaign in the US; it overlaps with some of the other efforts underway—for instance the Schools of Mass Destruction Working Group effort to build opposition on campuses across the country.

The Schools Working Group is developing a Pledge for students, faculty, administrators, alumni/ae and others; the Pledge not only provides for direct personal engagement with the issue of nuclear weapons, it is an opportunity for education. Others are working on getting local governments and public officials to take similar pledges—to spurn activities supporting nuclear weapons. The Localities and Legislators Working Group is building a large database of actions already taken and tracking ongoing efforts.

The bottom line? No matter how you want to work on nuclear weapons, there is a place for you—to contribute your energy and ideas and to draw on the energy and ideas of others. To get connected, contact OREPA at orep@earthlink.net and you can be added to a listserv to get notice of Working Group meetings.

WATCH THIS SPACE

We are working to build a nuclear abolition movement—or to re-build if you are old enough to remember the Freeze and the Mobilization for Survival.

It won’t happen if people stand on the sidelines to cheer the activists. There aren’t enough activists to make a difference right now. It will only happen if everyone gets involved—gets active somehow.

What is happening now is only the beginning. If January 22, 2021 was a spark to re-energize the nuclear abolition movement, the work since then has been fanning that spark to life. We are now in the process of adding fuel—developing resources and recruiting more people who are ready, either once again or for the first time, to confront the threat of nuclear weapons and to organize for the future.

At some point, a point we can’t identify at the moment, the time will come when the will of the people for an end to the nuclear threat will become a consuming fire.

Years ago US President/General Dwight Eisenhower said, “One of these days the people are going to want peace so badly that politicians will have to give it to them.”

With the enactment of the Ban Treaty by 122 nations, its ratification by 55 nations, and its entry into force, we have taken a giant step toward that day. We cannot stop now.

First Ban Treaty Update

One year after the entry into force, the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons calls for a first meeting of states parties. The meeting, which is also open to states that have not yet signed or ratified the Treaty, was to be held in Vienna, Austria in January 2022.

The first meeting has been bumped, though, by the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty Review Conference. The NPT Review, usually a month-long meeting at the UN, was scheduled for April/May of last year, but got bumped by COVID-19. There was talk of a virtual meeting last fall, and then the meeting was rescheduled for later this year.

But the resurgence of the virus in its variant forms made the fall meeting too uncertain, so the UN began looking for the next 30-day window that it could host a major international meeting. That window was open in January 2022, so the move was made—at least for now.

In order to avoid a conflict and allow participation in both meetings, the TPNW first meeting of states parties, a 3-day meeting, is being moved to March 22-24, 2022; it will still be held in Vienna.

The International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN), of which OREPA is a member, is coordinating Non-governmental Organization participation.

As with so much of our lives these days, these meetings likely hinge on the state of COVID-19 risks, including travel restrictions—so stay tuned for future updates!
Information about the cost and schedule for the Uranium Processing Facility bomb plant in Oak Ridge has always been hard to come by.

For years, Tennessee Senator Lamar Alexander, who chaired the budget subcommittee that pays for nuclear weapons programs, declared that he was meeting regularly with the project personnel and they were “on schedule and on budget.”

OREPA has always been skeptical of those assurances, especially since neither Alexander nor his staff would provide any documentation. One staff committee member, asked directly about the budget and schedule, laughed out loud, indicating that neither existed.

We predicted that the UPF would, like most NNSA projects, would fail to meet its schedule or budget. We also predicted that no one would admit that as long as Alexander was in charge of writing the checks for the UPF.

Now, Lamar Alexander is gone, retired.

His departure has hardly opened the floodgates of information, but we have been able to learn a little more about the project.

In July of this year, three of the four UPF construction projects at the Y-12 Nuclear Weapons Complex in Oak Ridge went from “Green” to “Yellow” on DOE’s project dashboard, a spreadsheet that tracks all the major construction projects across the nuclear weapons complex.

Yellow, according to the dashboard, means “Project is at risk of breaching its performance baseline cost, schedule, or scope.”

In the case of the UPF, it is likely to be the first two. Alexander declared in 2014 that he had established a $6.5 billion cap on spending for the UPF. That number, noted some analysts, was heavily dependent on the project staying on schedule. Stretching the work out would multiply labor costs, and the project would face higher prices for materials.

Among the three UPF projects that have gone yellow is the main process building—the UPF; it is joined on the list by two support buildings—the Mechanical Electrical Building and the Salvage and Accountability Building. Together, the three buildings account for $6.2 billion of the projected $6.5 billion budget.

No one has a crystal ball, but it would not surprise us if the UPF project maintained its trajectory and entered the “Red” zone: Project is expected to breach its performance baseline cost, schedule, and scope.

The Department of Energy’s “Dashboard” tracks major projects as they progress.

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Your support keeps OREPA working—and collaborating

For the past eighteen months, we’ve been tossed on the waves of an unpredictable virus. Just when it began to look like “normal” was returning, the delta version threatens to return us to days full of questions.

OREPA has been working hard during the pandemic to continue our work for the abolition of nuclear weapons safely and effectively.

And while we’ve always worked with a long list of allies, the pandemic has provided us with new tools for collaboration, and the Ban Treaty has provided us with unprecedented reasons to use them.

So in these still uncertain times, you can be sure of at least one thing—the work of ridding the world of nuclear weapons will continue.

On page two of the newsletter, you see that OREPA is part of the Alliance for Nuclear Accountability—a network of grassroots groups at weapons sites across the US along with some national and regional allies. ANA focuses on stopping weapons production and cleaning up the legacy of contamination left behind at weapons sites.

We’re also part of Community Shares, a workplace giving organization similar to United Way, but for progressive organizations—it’s a way to connect with other local nonprofits.

And we’re a member of the Nobel Prize winning ICAN which has more than 600 member groups around the globe. We also work with Footprints for Peace and Büchel ist Überall, a German/Dutch campaign to get US nuclear weapons removed from the Büchel air base in Germany.

Collaboration multiplies our efforts exponentially—it’s the right thing to do, and it pays off. Plus it’s energizing and inspiring to connect with great people doing this work!

We can do all this only because we have generous supporters. We are truly a grassroots organization—no government grants, and foundation grants are rare. OREPA’s members keep us going.

As we move forward, we hope you will continue to invest in this critical work—that’s why there’s an envelope tucked in the newsletter.

If you prefer to give on-line, there’s a secure Donate button at orepa.org. Thank you!
Will you sign on to this letter?

Sometimes, context is everything. Take, for instance, a letter that was circulated via email looking for organizations to sign on. It was from Representative Pramila Jayapal, and the purpose of the letter was clearly to influence the Nuclear Posture Review now underway by the Biden Administration.

Preceded by an impressive list of endorsing organizations, the letter seeking House colleagues to sign on began: “I invite you to join me in urging President Biden to use the forthcoming Nuclear Posture Review to set a nuclear strategy that aims to limit the role of nuclear weapons in our national security, reduces unnecessary spending, and sets the stage for progress towards the recent agreement with Russian President Vladimir Putin to pursue additional arms control and risk reduction measures.”

So far, so good, and it is understandable that a letter seeking signatures from colleagues in the House would not stray too far from the authorized conversation—limit, not eliminate, the role of nuclear weapons; reduce, not cut altogether, unnecessary spending (leaving room for “necessary” spending); and encouraging the pursuit of arms control, not abolition.

And, finally, the ever-present “risk reduction” which sounds good but is, if you think about it, a complete and dangerous illusion, since anything short of the abolition of nuclear weapons leaves us facing an existential peril.

Still, the road to abolition, for now at least, will be traveled one step at a time. And the efforts outlined by Congresswoman Jayapal name some of those steps.

The actual letter to Biden has strong language—“grave concern”—and challenges the Biden budget’s proposed increase for every nuclear weapons program on the books, even one the Obama-Biden administration cut, but Trump reinstated.

It’s an excellent laundry list of budget cuts, and we should all hope it gets the attention of the Biden Administration and, even more, the members of Congress, House and Senate, who vote on the budget.

And then, in the last paragraph, comes trouble: “As you have stated, the sole purpose of US nuclear forces should be to deter a nuclear attack.”

That final paragraph proposes reductions in deployed strategic nuclear weapons by up to 1/3 the current New START levels, an act that would be a great and hopeful step. Nothing in the final paragraph requires the opening sentence, the one that gratuitously embraces the continued maintenance and deployment of a large nuclear stockpile based on the policy of deterrence.

OREPA signs on to many group letters seeking changes in policy or budget reductions. But we read them all, and we are careful about what we put our name on. A letter that undermines our fundamental goal is a no-brainer for us.

When a colleague asked about this, our Coordinator said, “I didn’t even send it to the committee that approves sign-ons. We can’t sign on to a letter that embraces a continuing nuclear stockpile or the policy of deterrence, especially if there is no mention of the ultimate goal of abolition or the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons.”

“Don’t let the perfect be the enemy of the good,” came back the reply.

But where is the good? Reductions in funding, even eliminating a weapon or two, leaving us still with thousands of nuclear weapons, knowing it would only take a hundred, maybe less, to trigger nuclear winter—coupled with the failure to discuss the humanitarian and ecological impacts of nuclear weapons, pretending that reductions actually make us safer—these things are merely an illusion of good.

Years ago, one of OREPA’s co-founders, Steve Smith, listened to a Department of Energy official describe efforts to partially clean up a waste site in Oak Ridge. The official was quite pleased that they had made progress, and when he finished he was dismayed to hear Steve say, “I feel like we were drowning with ten feet of water over our heads, and now you tell us it’s only six feet of water. But we’re still drowning.”

It’s important not to lose sight of our goal, and not to accept the illusion of progress; we demand the real thing.

OREPA supports all kinds of interim measures that move us toward the elimination of nuclear weapons, even baby steps like cutting a single budget line for a new warhead.

But we also support giant leaps, like the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, and we insist that conversations about nuclear weapons must take place in the real world, in the new context in which we are living. Things are not the same as they were last year, before the Treaty had entered into force.

It is up to us, every one of us, to use the enormous power of the Treaty—we make it true by speaking its name. And we must do that every time we have a conversation about nuclear weapons, with people around us, in Letters to the Editor, and when we communicate with Senators and Representatives.

Allowing decision-makers to control the conversation, and allowing them to push forward with old policies as though the Treaty does not exist, is not only wrong, it is dangerous. It prolongs the era of the Great Nuclear Threat. We won’t sign on for that.