

Hiroshima atomic bomb survivors want apology from Barack Obama

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Tokyo: A group representing Japanese survivors of US atomic bombings urged President Barack Obama to hear their stories and apologise when he visits Hiroshima next week.

Terumi Tanaka, a survivor of the Nagasaki atomic bombing

Two leaders of the Tokyo-based nationwide group told a news conference on Thursday that many survivors still want an apology, though they have long avoided an outright demand for one out of fear that it would be counterproductive.

Toshiki Fujimori, a survivor of the Hiroshima atomic bombing, said he found it awkward to hear local and central government officials say they are not asking for an apology.

“I suspect there was a pressure (not to seek an apology) to create an atmosphere that would make it easier for Obama to visit Hiroshima,” Fujimori said, declining to identify where the pressure was coming from. “But many of the survivors don’t think they can do without an apology at all.”

He said the survivors want Obama to know that their suffering is not limited to immediate damage and visible, physical scars. They also suffered discrimination at work, in marriage and in other areas of their lives, from their own people in Japan, said Fujimori, who nearly died in the blast at age 1.

“The bombing of Hiroshima on August 6, 1945, killed 140,000 people and nearly destroyed the city. A second atomic attack three days later on Nagasaki in southern Japan killed 73,000 more people. About 180,000 people recognised by the government as survivors are still alive. Many have remained unmarried and without children because of concerns about birth defects, or have suffered from cancer and other radiation-induced illnesses.

Obama is to visit Hiroshima on May 27 after the Group of Seven summit in central Japan, becoming the first serving American president to do so. In announcing Obama’s visit, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe said he will escort him and suggested that no apology is necessary.

A Cabinet-approved statement signed by Abe last August states that the bombings “caused an extremely regrettable humanitarian situation because of its widespread damage,” but does not call them war crimes.

It says it is more important to make an effort toward achieving a nuclear-free world “rather than seeking an apology and remorse from the United States at this point, 70 years after the war.”

Washington said Obama won’t apologise and a meeting with survivors is unlikely. Japan’s government has also told US officials that it is not expecting an apology, according to Japanese and American officials.

That apparently prompted the survivors to try to let Obama know their feelings and hope that he will be committed to a nuclear-free world, which they say can be achieved only by learning and coming to terms with the past.

Terumi Tanaka, a survivor of the Nagasaki atomic bombing who serves as secretary-general of the Japan Confederation of A and H Bomb Sufferers Organisations, said he wishes that Obama will apologise at least to the survivors.

But Shizuka Kamei, a national lawmaker from Hiroshima whose sister died in the blast, said Obama is not welcome

without an apology.

“If he is not going to show remorse or offer an apology, he shouldn’t come,” he told a separate news conference. “Is he going to Hiroshima for sightseeing? Then please come after stepping down as president. I’ll be there to welcome him.”

- AP