HIROSHIMA, Japan, Aug. 5—His ears are missing, his fingers are deformed and he is weakened by chronic illness, making Akihiro Takahashi a living testimonial to the horrific results of the atomic bomb that exploded over Hiroshima half a century ago.

Mr. Takahashi, who was 14 at the time, became director of the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum and a campaigner against nuclear weapons. Like many Japanese, Mr. Takahashi argues that the United States broke international law and all principles of humanity by using nuclear weapons.

Sipping an iced green tea, Mr. Takahashi responded to some of the arguments that Americans often raise to justify the use of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Mr. Takahashi spoke with Nicholas D. Kristof, Tokyo bureau chief of The New York Times, and his answers were translated by The Times.

Q. You say that the atomic bombing was inhumane and a violation of international law. But some 55 million people died in World War II, all horribly, and less than one-half of 1 percent died at Hiroshima. What is so special about the victims here?

A. This was a special type of attack, with a weapon that used radiation. One bomb alone destroyed a large city, in one moment. By 1950, about 200,000 people had died in Hiroshima, and in total in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, more than 300,000 people died. So maybe the number of people who died is small in the overall total of World War II deaths, but there were special features of this attack.

The atomic bombing was indiscriminate killing, but that boundary was crossed with the Tokyo firebombing, and at Dresden, and earlier when Japan bombed Chongqing in China. Granted that the atomic bombing is different in that it brings radiation, does it matter so much whether you're killed by a fire bomb or by an atomic bomb?
First, the atomic bomb was one bomb. In the case of conventional bombs, you have to drop many, one after another, to get such an effect. But just one kilogram of uranium reached fission, and that instantly destroyed the entire city of Hiroshima and caused so many deaths.

A conventional bomb does not have a heat wave. But with the atomic bomb, at the moment of the explosion, a fireball is created with a temperature of millions of degrees Celsius, and the area on the ground below the bomb reached 3,000 to 4,000 degrees Celsius. Steel starts to melt at 1,530 degrees, so that was much hotter than molten steel.

Then the wind from the atomic bomb affected an area with a radius of 16 kilometers. At the moment of the explosion, the shock wave spread and was followed by a wind that reached 440 meters per second. Even the most powerful typhoon to hit Japan had a speed of only 82 meters per second. I myself was blown 10 meters by the blast.

Simply because the atomic bomb was so terrible, members of the peace faction in the Japanese Government in 1945 were almost pleased that it had been dropped. They could seize upon it as an excuse to surrender. Navy Minister Mitsumasa Yonai called it "a gift from heaven." So is it fair to blame the U.S.?

I think the Allies could have pressured Japan to end the war by demonstrating the power of the atomic bomb, by dropping the bomb not on a city but somewhere else. And even if I were to concede for the sake of argument that you dropped the bomb on Hiroshima to pressure Japan to surrender, then there was no need to bomb Nagasaki, because the effect of the bomb was known already. If you use your brain, there were many more ways to pressure Japan.

But even after two bombs, a surrender was just barely achieved. The Japanese Army resisted to the end, there was a coup attempt, and then a mutiny even after the peace was announced. So with anything less than two bombs on cities, mightn't the result have been a rejection of surrender -- and then an invasion of Japan, killing a million Japanese and giving the Soviet Union time to occupy northern Japan so that your country would be divided the way Korea still is?
That's only speculation. It might not have happened like that. And I'd like to ask why the U.S. dropped two different kinds of bombs, uranium type and plutonium type, on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. They wanted to experiment to see which type of bomb would be more effective.

It was an experiment to see which bomb America should rely on, uranium or plutonium. Therefore there was no need to drop the bomb on cities, because it was an experiment. I think the argument that the bomb was necessary to save lives came afterward.

Look, I don't want to make a comparison between the number of deaths from an atomic bomb and an invasion, but as long you raise it, I'll discuss it. Even U.S. historians say that the number of lives that would have been lost would have been in the several tens of thousands. There's no basis for talking about a million lives being saved. In Hiroshima and Nagasaki, on the other hand, 300,000 lives were lost. And radiation continues to damage the human body.

If Americans really had wanted to end the war early, they could have given the peace faction information about effects of the atomic bomb, or about the prospective damage from an invasion.

But the U.S. didn't make such efforts, and I think the reason was that the U.S. had already decided it wanted to test the atomic bomb. I think that's clear from all kinds of documents. It's apparent that the U.S. had created the atomic bomb after a huge expense, and they wanted to test it.