

Report on Hiroshima-Nagasaki Fast in London, August 2016

Outline of the Fast

The fast started quietly but movingly with a commemoration for Hiroshima at 8.15 on Saturday 6th. Four of us, Michal, Marc, Julia and Margery were there to read texts and recollect in silence. We sang 'Kodomo tachini', a song in Japanese written by a hibakusha, which Margery taught us.

We had previously set out our banners and posters in our customary spot outside the Ministry of Defence. They made a bright and striking sight along the railings of the Ministry, stretching over more than twenty yards



We spent the morning leafleting passers-by (mostly tourists), then Michal, Margery and Julia set off for the CND Hiroshima Day commemoration at Tavistock Square. They listened to most of the speeches, including moving tributes to the victims of Hiroshima, and announcements made by Tim Wallis of Quaker Peace and Disarmament concerning different events including the London and International fasts.

The afternoon passed quietly, with more leafleting, and most welcome visits from, amongst others, several of the people who had earlier attended the CND rally. In the evening we made our way to Westminster Quaker Meeting House, where our sponsor Andy was waiting to accompany us for our overnight stay. Jed joined us before nightfall, bringing our total numbers to five.

On the Sunday morning we attempted to establish ourselves outside the front of the MoD, in Whitehall where there were more passers-by – and on MoD land. Our otherwise friendly MoD Police chaperone indicated this would not be tolerated; after consulting amongst ourselves we decided not to make a stand on this: there was little to gain from doing so in terms of publicity, and a lot to lose in terms of the momentum of our protest.

In the afternoon we were delighted to be joined by a Colin, a Baptist minister, his wife Chris and daughter Bethanne. They added their own cheerful banners and pennants to ours, assisted with leafleting, and sung peace songs with us in the shade of a banner-decked tree.

Two of us then took ourselves off to Westminster Quaker Meeting, where we met a group of about 12 London Young Quakers. After joining them for silent Quaker worship, we explained the history and purpose of the international fast to them, answered their sympathetic questions, and invited them to join us for protests and/or fasting for the remainder of the fast. Julia, who was fasting in the day but not the evenings, was also able to share their delicious and simple evening meal.

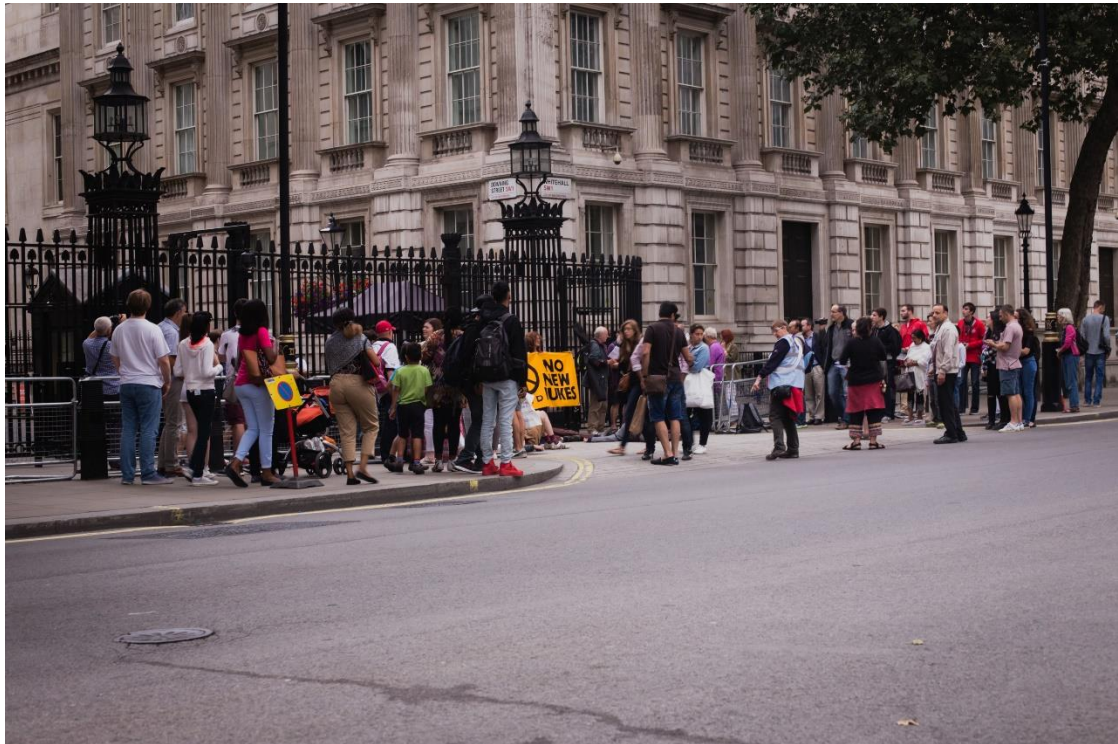
Our sponsors for the Sunday night were Diana and her wonderful peace-loving dog. Despite an uncertain connection, we greatly enjoyed the skype calls to our fellow-fasters in France, Germany and the US. We were however dismayed to learn of the treatment meted out to two fasters/activists in Paris, who had been held in a police cell for 28,5 hours, before being charged with “serious damage” for the extremely benign offence of putting stickers on the window of the “Républicains” political party. The somewhat forced but pragmatic cheerfulness and tolerance of the British police (at least toward the sort of people who take part in peace fasts...) is welcome when contrasted with the heavy-handedness and brutal repressiveness of their counterparts across the channel.

By the Monday morning there were six of us, with the addition of Florence, French by origin, Scottish in her heart, and currently resident in London. We actively leafleted outside the MoD, where a surprising number of civil servants, no doubt more concerned to preserve their jobs than to preserve Trident, took and read our leaflets.

We leafleted further throughout the day, in the meantime Jed drew a bird of peace on the path where we were based, which quickly became an inspiration and a rallying point for us, and a source of interest and admiration for passers-by.

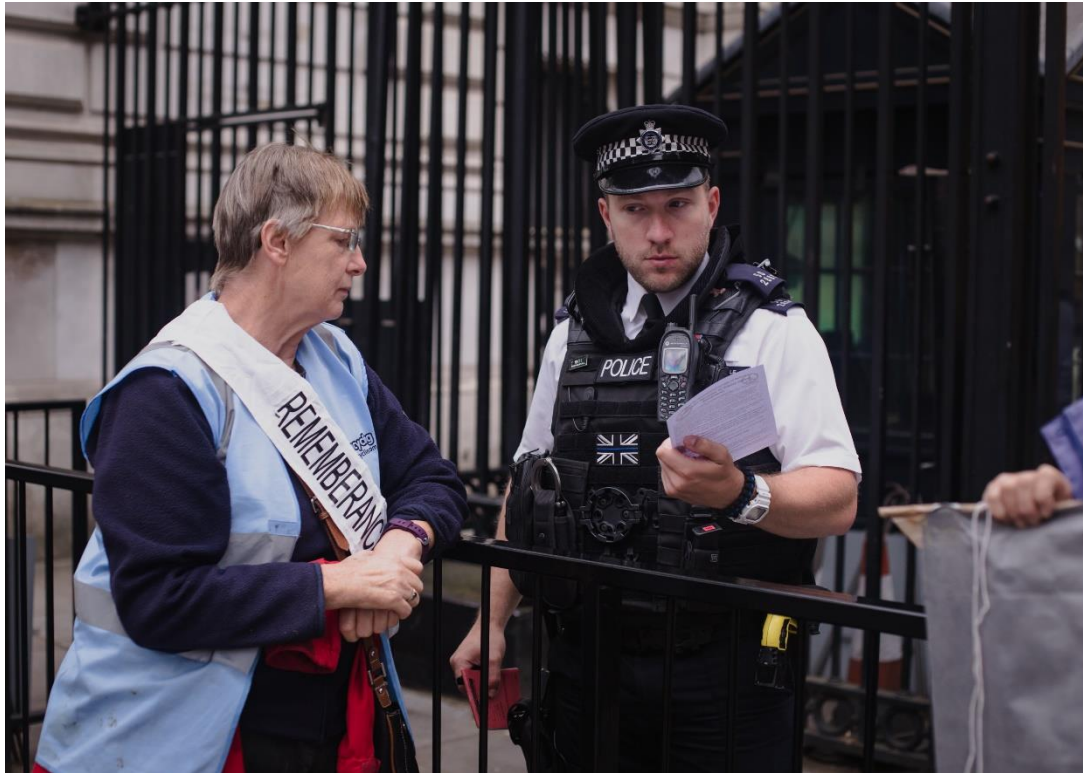


The Monday evening marked the high point of the fast from the point of view of action. Reinforcements from the Young Quakers and others places meant that eight of us were available to take part in a die-in outside Downing Street, to the singing of the *Raised Voices* choir. At 6.30 exactly four of us stretched out in front of the main gate, while four others liaised with the police, engaged with passers-by, and made sure the action was safe and secure. Rosie was there to take photos, and the choir sang with great effect.









The die-in lasted about 30 minutes, followed by more songs, protests and waving of our banners.

Many tourists witnessed the scene, asked questions, commented, and turned their smartphones and cameras away from Downing Street itself and towards the scene in front of them. Overwhelmingly their comments and reactions were sympathetic. We were technically blocking the highway, but the police decided not to intervene, so that the whole event was moving, non-violent and evocative.

After a night back at the Meeting House with our sponsor Jennifer, we assembled for a final non-breakfast and some last-minute leafleting outside the MoD, then prepared our Nagasaki day commemoration.

We chose powerful texts concerning both the dropping of the bomb itself, and the sufferings of the Hibakusha. We sang several songs in different languages, and commemorated in silence, quietly gathered around our bird of peace. By this time there were ten of us – we had been joined by Laurence, who had been fasting at home throughout the four days, by Habib of CND, and by the Raised Voices choir member Lyn.



Together we broke our fast around a delicious and simple meal of fruit, vegetables and nuts. One or two of us then went on to the Pax Christi service for Franz Jagerstatter and prayers for Nagasaki in Westminster Cathedral, and to the Buddhist ceremony for Nagasaki day in Battersea Park, where speeches, song and reports included updates from Fukushima power station clean-up, anti-nuclear-power and weapons campaigners from Japan, and an anti-militarist campaigner who has been spending time on Okinawa Island, where there are over 33 U.S. military bases. Though there was much sorrow in all these reports, the ceremony of sending our wishes for peace along the Thames in the small floating lanterns - made earlier in the day by young and old, locals, tourists and passers-by - left the participants feeling uplifted and united.



Synthesis

Four of us fasted throughout the four days, at least four people fasted partially or intermittently. We distributed 2,000 flyers, spoke with hundreds of people as we leafleted, and received dozens of visits. We staged a successful die-in, visually powerful and orally reinforced by the singing of the Raised Voices choir. We have greatly appreciated the support of many individuals and organizations, the interest of the Young Quakers in particular, and the hospitality of the Westminster Quaker Meeting House. Particular thanks are due to our sponsors Andy, Diana, and Jennifer.

We know that the numbers involved in the London fast are still small, when compared to the dozens or hundreds who fast in other countries, and above all to the scale of the issues involved. We continue to believe in the value of the fast. As Julia put it during our meeting with the Young Quakers, foregoing food is one way of divesting oneself for a while, of the complexity and superfluity of so much which encumbers us in the modern world. It is a mark of respect for the victims of one of the most horrific acts of barbarity of humankind against humankind. And because of the respect which fasting inspires in others, it can also be a vehicle for effective forms of protest. Next year we will be right there again, outside Parliament, Downing Street and the MoD, with very temporarily empty stomachs, but full of hope for a better world.

The photos of the Bird of Peace and the Final Commemoration ceremony are by Laurence Hall; the photo of breaking the fast is by Julia Mercer. All other photos ©Rosie Holtom