

"In an all out nuclear war, more destructive power than in the whole of World War 2 would be unleashed every second for the long afternoon it would take for all the missiles and bombs to fall. A World War Two every second, more people killed in the first few hours than in all the wars of history put together. The survivors, if any, would live in despair amid the poisoned ruins of a civilisation that had committed suicide."

Jimmy Carter, former President of the USA

What We Can Expect

On August 6 1945 a single aircraft dropped a single atomic weapon in the 12 — 15 kiloton range over the city of Hiroshima. Within seconds the city — the size of Nottingham — was destroyed and within a few days more than 100,000 people had died of their injuries. **Grasp this and then multiply it by several thousand - that's what we can expect.**

A nuclear war today would create unimaginable human suffering. The immediate dead could number tens of millions and the survivors would experience physical and mental injury over months and years. Many would die lingering, painful deaths and our society and way of life as we know it would be totally destroyed. The effects both geographically and in human terms would be devastating.

Initial physical injury or death would be caused by the resulting heat and light from the explosion coupled with the force of the blast wave. The intense light created by a nuclear explosion will produce either temporary or permanent burns to the retina of the eye and we can expect 1st, 2nd and 3rd degree burns to cause two thirds of the fatalities. The blast wave ruptures lungs and other internal organs and resulting powerful winds cause the collapse of buildings and shifting debris to add to the chaos.

The reality is horrifying. Here is a short quotation from a child at school in Hiroshima:

"We ran to the swimming pool, dragging a classmate whose legs had been injured and eyes blinded. What I saw there. There was already one dead in the water. He must have fallen in, blinded because of the burns all over his body. An arm lay on the ground. One person was trying to put out someone else's burning clothes with the blood that was gushing from his own wounds. Yet another jumped into the water with his clothes on fire and drowned there, unable to move his burned body. Another was beyond recognition, with his face swollen to two or three times normal size. There was a skull split in half. A headless torso. Two of my friends hung to my arms. The surface of their bodies had been burned all over, and their skin had peeled off and was hanging loose from their elbows like the sleeves of a kimono. Their bodies slippery and red, they clung to my weak body. Their eyes were gone and they could not see anything."

Exposure to lethal nuclear fall-out is the most horrific and long-term effect of nuclear attack. You can't see it, you can't smell it, you can't taste it but it causes untold biological damage not just at the time of explosion but for years afterwards. Bone marrow, internal linings and the reproductive organs are amongst the most susceptible to permanent damage.

As the radiation dose (intensity and time) increases, so does the severity of the damage. At first there are warning signs: malaise, nausea, vomiting and diarrhoea, there may be bleeding from the gums or bowels, hair falls out. Death follows slowly.

Continued exposure over days or weeks leads to increased possibility of contracting forms of cancer, leukaemia and cataracts. The number of stillbirths and genetic malformations would be notably higher.

Government medical plans state: "Those with only radiation injury should not be admitted to hospital". For those who have been exposed to radiation, there will therefore be no treatment.

Though the medical effects of a single hit are obviously horrific, the psychological effects of such an event on individuals and the nation as a whole are even more terrifying and are often ignored or totally discounted.

We are led to believe that we will emerge from our refuges into a world not unlike that of post-blitz London. This, unfortunately, will not be so. In a post-holocaust world it will, perhaps, be better not to survive.

Survivors of a nuclear attack would have a combination of injuries, irradiation as well as burns and possible blindness. Conditions will be grossly insanitary and there will be little or no official aid or support.

But there will be fear and fear makes pain much worse. Whole families will be trapped indoors without heating or lighting, without windows, with cold contaminated winds blowing, without communication. They will be hungry, thirsty, bored and lonely, probably in pain, probably dying.

Public health will become a major consideration. Rats and insects are significantly less vulnerable to radiation so communicable diseases could become prevalent. The task of burying the dead will be formidable. Bodies will lie around for weeks, even months. Water supplies will be scarce and contaminated as will food, both having been unprotected from the direct and indirect effects of fall-out.

And even if we were prepared for an attack, which is highly unlikely, there are still complications: lack of warning, an attack during winter months, several weeks of continuing attack, nuclear power stations or military bases being hit, chemical or biological warfare. The list goes on

It all sounds so improbable and unlikely that we feel safe in the knowledge that "it'll never happen to us". And yet the whole process is so simple that it very easily could and, on a couple of occasions, very nearly has. The Cuban Missile Crisis for example brought us frighteningly close to disaster and there have been a few situations since where commands and observations have been misinterpreted and nuclear attacks have only narrowly been avoided.

Protect and Survive

When the Wind Blows

"Protect and Survive", the Government issue leaflet (1980) referred to during the course of the play, has now been taken out of circulation. There has been no attempt to replace it with alternative suggestions as to what to do in the event of a nuclear attack.