

Exchanges Which Spread from Children to Communities —Support for Inter-Ethnic Exchanges in Macedonia—



Ms. Ueda (fifth from right) with the children of Struga (Photo: JCCP)

In Macedonia, twice a year, in spring and fall, not only the government but also the people come out to plant trees. In spring 2010, the tree planting was conducted on March 30. As in previous years, the day was a national holiday, and government officials, students, and school children all gathered together at their designated spots and spent several hours planting young cedar and pine trees which were distributed by the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Economy.

Ms. Takako Ueda was also one of those who participated in the tree-planting event that day with approximately 300 people, including local elementary school children and teachers, in Struga in southern Macedonia. Ms. Ueda works with a Japanese NGO, the Japan Center for Conflict Prevention (JCCP), and is based in the Balkans. The people she planted trees with, also participate in the collaborative cleaning and workshop project^(*), which JCCP is implementing in Struga, cooperating with the Government of Japan^(**).

The people of Macedonia, which became independent from the former Yugoslavia in 1991, are known for their mild and courteous character. Struga is a city of rich cultures where such people live, and which have beautiful historical buildings and a cobblestone main street. However, like other regions in Macedonia, the city is composed of areas with different atmospheres, where ethnic Macedonians and ethnic Albanians live separately from each other.

In Struga, shortly before the presidential election in 2009, large clashes often broke out between high school students of the two ethnic groups. These events reconfirmed the need for exchanges between ethnic Albanians and ethnic Macedonians, who live in different areas and attend different schools according to their ethnic group.

In 2010, JCCP initiated a project in Struga for

elementary school children, which aims to contribute to the reconciliation of the ethnic groups. Under this project, children regularly participate in collaborative activities which cut across ethnicity and religion, including cleaning various parts of the town, visiting each others' schools, and holding workshops for enjoying origami (paper folding) and singing songs together.

Along with Mr. Hiroshi Matsumoto, JCCP representative in the Balkans, Ms. Ueda was actively involved in this project. She became interested in international cooperation, shocked to watch a TV documentary program on the conflicts in Bosnia and Herzegovina when she was a university student. She worked as a Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteer (JOCV) in Poland, and has supported youths in developing countries through NGO activities. Ms. Ueda noted, "My life work is to build communities, working with the people who live there, in which they will forever be able to live happily and in good health."

"Thanks to the principal of one ethnic group, whose own child was involved in an inter-ethnic clash and who supported the cleaning activities and workshop at the principals' meeting, the principal of the other ethnic group, who at first was very passive, turned out to be positive toward our efforts." Ms. Ueda thus said that the project gained momentum from the fact that the people of Struga themselves actively participated in the collaborative programs.

Ms. Ueda shared her thoughts for a bright future. "I was very happy to hear that, as the fruits of the project spread from the children to their families, and then to the community residents, some children visited a community of a different ethnic group from theirs." She added, "I would like to expand the network of people who will join us in the efforts to support these children."



Children planting trees (Photo: JCCP)

*1 Grant Assistance for Japanese NGO Project

*2 Promotion of exchanges among different ethnic groups / Collaboration Project for Cleaning Struga City by School Children.