

19 Cleaning up the Town!

— Three Ethnic Groups Living in Harmony in Serbia —



"Bujanovac, Bujanovac, our home. Let us sing together of the town we all love," sang 2,000 children in loud voices. The clean-up activities and workshops in Bujanovac in the southern region of Serbia started in February 2009, and cute children brought excitement to the town with their joyful singing. A Japanese NGO, the Japan Center for Conflict Prevention (JCCP) has brought a breath of fresh air to Bujanovac, which has a mix with Albanian, Serbian, and Roma ethnic groups, and has helped the different groups to live in harmony.*¹

Bujanovac is located in the southern region of Serbia, which is just five kilometers from the national border with Kosovo, and has a population of approximately 60,000 people. 60% are Albanian, 30% are Serbian, and the remaining 10% are Roma and other ethnicities. There are two Albanian elementary schools and one Serbian elementary school, one Albanian high school and one Serbian high school. The students take classes in the language of their ethnic group, and there had been no exchanges with students in other schools. JCCP in cooperation with the Government of Japan carried out a project for exchanges between the ethnic groups.

The city's public health office and three elementary schools held an advance meeting on clean-up activities regarding the date, place and, method, and the idea was to carry out operations efficiently and cooperatively while focusing on the safety of the children of the three ethnic groups. Parks, areas around bus stops, marketplaces and schools, and other parts of the town were gradually cleaned, and now the parks are beautifully covered with flowers and greenery without a single piece of trash.

At workshops each week, the three schools take turns hosting exchanges with children from the other schools. The children at the host school together with the teachers in charge prepare the necessary materials including pictures, songs, origami (paper folding), and games. At first there were problems with language differences and bullies bothering children of different ethnic groups, but gradually children began to naturally intermingle with those of other ethnicities, and they planned and drew large pictures together. The children also had fun together singing Japanese children's songs and songs of their three ethnic groups.

At the workshops, the children also sang the Japanese song "Shojoji no Tanukibayashi (Tanuki Raccoons' Night Spree at Shojoji Temple)." The song was led by Mr. Hiroshi

Matsumoto, who works as project representative. The children formed a circle and imagined a baby raccoon sticking out its belly. Then they acted out the song, actually drumming on their bellies, and the room was filled with thunderous laughter. Mr. Matsumoto says, "In order for projects focusing on the children to continue for a long period of time, whether it be clean-ups or learning, it is important for the children to always have fun."

Many photos of the clean-up activities and workshops were taken and displayed at the town square, city hall, and community center together with pictures drawn by the children. They were also posted on the wall in the schools. Seeing the children picking up garbage together in happy harmony, three companies in the city began to plant flowers in the parks and along the roads. It seems that the small children made an impression on adults.

Mr. Matsumoto intends to continue to watch over Bujanovac, for a long period of time where the walls between ethnic groups are in the process of being torn down. He says, "JCCP will regularly visit Bujanovac for as long as possible, and we plan on watching the status of activities there."

These ongoing activities for children are eliminating the hatred and distrust among the ethnic groups generated in their past conflicts. There is now momentum for the Albanian, Serbian, and Roma ethnic groups to live together in harmony in the beautiful flower-covered with the city of Bujanovac.



Mr. Matsumoto at a workshop
(Photo: Mr. Matsumoto)



A clean-up activity (Photo: Mr. Matsumoto)

*1 Grant assistance for Japanese NGO project "Promoting Cooperation between Different Ethnic Groups / Collaboration Project for Cleaning Bujanovac City by School Children."