



Building a Multi-ethnic Future for Kosovo

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Kosovo, an autonomous province of the Republic of Serbia administered since 1999 by the United Nations, has a population of about two million people, 90% of whom are ethnic Albanians with smaller populations of Serbs, Turks, and Bosniaks. Kosovo's strong desire for independence has long been a factor in disputes with Serbia, culminating in 1998 in open conflict resulting in the deaths of 10,000 - 12,000 Kosovar Albanians, many in brutal massacres by Serbian forces. By 1999 nearly a million fled or were forcibly expelled from their homes and sought refuge in neighboring countries.

Following international intervention, Kosovar Albanians returned to a devastated region and shattered economy; they and the remaining Serbs (roughly 10% of the population) faced an uncertain future due to Kosovo's ambiguous political status as well as doubts about the ethnic groups' capacity to live side by side. Now, after eight years of political limbo, the UN is at last prepared to make recommendations on a political structure, and Kosovo is expected to declare its independence. Once a political settlement is reached, the hard work of reconciliation must begin in earnest.



In December 2006, Karuna Center was invited by Save the Children and Search for Common Ground to train kindergarten teachers to lead multi-ethnic, multi-lingual kindergartens. Based on the success of Search for Common Ground's Moziak kindergarten program in Macedonia for Albanian and Macedonian children, Save the Children has launched a similar program in Kosovo. Depending on the region, Albanian, Serbian, Bosniak, or Turkish children will join together and be taught in both languages.

Our training took place in the small, largely Turkish town of Prizren in southern Kosovo. Participants all had prior teaching experience. None, however, had worked in multi-ethnic or multi-lingual settings, nor had they been given the opportunity to speak in mixed settings about the horrific impact of the war. The training focused on two principal elements: ways of teaching children from an early age to be tolerant of ethnic and religious differences; and ways of using the program to foster reconciliation among different parent communities. Of course, in order to work effectively in multi-ethnic teams, the teachers themselves must also heal from their own vastly different experiences of the war and its aftermath.

The group had already worked together on pedagogical issues and had developed enough trust and cohesion to work with us on the sensitive challenges of conflict resolution and building multi-ethnic tolerance in the Kosovo context. They readily grasped the applications of the tools we offered to the classroom, to work with parents, and to team building with each other. On the final morning we taught the skills of dialogue; in the ensuing practice session there was a heartfelt, deep discussion of the participants' future roles not only as teachers, but as peacebuilders working with mixed ethnicities. While they approached the subject cautiously, participants clearly welcomed the opportunity to speak candidly in a mixed group about the pain of the past and their hopes for the future.



Children who grow up speaking each other's languages and sharing in each other's festivals and culture will play a crucial role in the creation of a new society in this long troubled region of the world. However, as our dialogue work revealed, their teachers need ways to address the legacy of the war openly in order to build the mutual trust that will enable them to stand as examples in the classroom and to work effectively with mixed groups of parents around the tensions that will inevitably emerge. We believe that we offered the teachers a good beginning foundation on these issues, and we will remain available for further support as the program unfolds.

For more information about this program, please contact:

Karuna Center for Peacebuilding, Inc.
447 West Street
Amherst, MA 01002
www.karunacenter.org