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Danes use soccer to unite children from diverse backgrounds

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BAALBEK: A Danish NGO is promoting a new means of peace-building in conflict zones by hosting soccer events aimed at uniting different ethnic and religious groups. On Sunday, the Bekaa Valley city of Baalbek's main public park, Ras al-Ain, hosted a soccer festival "Open Fun Football School" held by the Danish NGO Cross Cultures Project Association in Lebanon (CCPA), which has worked since 2005 on establishing dialogue and cooperation across cultural divides in the region.

The interest of the locals was reflected by the high turnout on Sunday. Around 250 kids and their families participated in the social activities organized by CCPA.

"Our goal is to create a dialogue among different ethnic [or religious] backgrounds in divided societies," said Jens Juul Petersen, CCPA's project assistant.

He added that by choosing soccer as a theme, CCPA teams up children from different groups "who do not have enough opportunity to meet one another."

"Football is our theme, because everybody likes football here in Lebanon. We are proud to see big number of girls willing to join our football activities which is known to be more popular among boys," Petersen said.

The social worker explained that CCPA's soccer project not only melts ethnic and religious barriers, "but also eliminates the gender taboos, while creating a common ground for children to share their experiences.

Jacques, a 7-year-old Christian resident of Baalbek, said he was thrilled to meet up with his peers from different families. Jacques added he had never met a Palestinian before, "but today I was introduced to some."

When asked about the reason for encouraging their children to participate in the "Open Fun Football School," Jacques' parents replied in French: "Socialization and connaissance," for "socializing and mingling."

The Baalbek municipality also supported the day-long activities by providing food, water and gift items for participants.

"We are pleased to welcome Danish visitors in Baalbek," Vice President of the Baalbek Municipality Khaled Rifai told The Daily Star.

In the aftermath of the summer 2006 war with Israel, many playgrounds together with schools, parks and public areas were devastated in southern Lebanon, Baalbek, and Beirut's southern suburbs, leaving many children with no opportunities to socialize and play with each other.

"We are giving the next generation an opportunity to control their universe while rebuilding their self-confidence through sport activities organized together with local authorities," said CCPA's regional coordinator, Anders Ronild, who served with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Lebanon prior to his career with CCPA.

"Every week, at least 8,000 CCPA members are actively involved in the project," he added.

The Danish organization's choice of soccer as a theme seems to be achieving its goal of creating unity within a diverse community in Baalbek.

"Thirty-five percent of the participants are recorded to be from Palestinian origin, followed by 30 percent of Shiites, 20 percent Sunnis and 15 percent are from a Christian background," said Mohammed Abdulsater, CCPA's Baalbek coach, who was leading the team of volunteers monitoring Sunday's activities.

Ronild stressed the importance of volunteers in implementing CCPA's peace-building projects, explaining that there were three main factors that motivated volunteers.

"Volunteers are motivated if the cause is meaningful, the need is obvious and most important, the activities are fun," Ronild said.

With the Lebanese authorities unable to accommodate the needs of many children, international organizations are actively partaking in developmental activities across Lebanon.

"Denmark is using 0.8% of its national budget for peace-building projects in developing countries," according to Jens Vesterager, the representative of Rockwool Foundation, one of CCPA's financial supporters.

The Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs also contributes to the funding of CCPA.

"Denmark has long been a state of peace, and that is the reason why we are supporting CCPA's peace-building projects in Lebanon," Vesterager said.

According to Vesterager, the promotion of peace using various means "facilitates cross cultural dialogue."

He added that choosing soccer as a theme not only relates to the Danish sport culture, but also serves the interest of Lebanese children, "who do not have access to necessary facilities because of their economic conditions."

"Our main goal is to see children integrating into their society constituted by different ethnic and religious backgrounds," Vesterager told The Daily Star.

Fatmi, the mother of 9-year-old Saleem from Baalbek's Wavel Palestinian refugee camp praised CCNP as a "unique organization."

"It provides kids with the opportunity to meet peers from other religious or social backgrounds," she said.