

National Unity through Sports

Daisuke Kanamori (center) participates in a “Tug of Peace” in South Sudan during the NUD “Peace and Culture Day,” which is designed to facilitate interactions among youths and with the public

South Sudan promotes national unity for peace through National Unity Day (NUD) with the participation of athletes of various ethnicities.

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SOUTH Sudan achieved independence from Sudan in 2011. But in 2013 political confrontation between the president and then-vice president developed into ethnic confrontation, which caused armed conflict to break out. The situation remained unstable. Amid this situation, the South Sudanese Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports planned NUD aiming at promoting national unity and exchange among young people of different regions and ethnicities and requested the Japan International Cooperation Agency’s (JICA)

cooperation. In response to this request, JICA began providing support for NUD in 2015.

Daisuke Kanamori, who works in the JICA South Sudan Office, says, “The Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports has developed trust with JICA, which has carried out support activities in a wide range of areas, such as infrastructure development, education and health, since South Sudan won independence. I believe this is what prompted the Ministry to ask JICA for cooperation.”

As Ministry officials did not have enough experience in holding major events like NUD, JICA provided administrative support, such as drawing up a written plan, meeting with local governments, and contacting sports groups. In addition, JICA also provided support for fund-raising from international organizations, including the United Nations, foreign governments and private companies, as well as supporting expenses, such as costs for venues and accommodation, meals, and transportation of players and coaches.

In this way, in January 2016 the first NUD was held

The NUD soccer final attracted a large crowd

The NUD women's 800-meter final



in the capital Juba with the participation of about 350 athletes from nine regions across the country. Sports events, such as soccer and track events including short-distance sprints and relay races, were held for about a week. The areas used for the event were put into good condition by the Japan Self-Defense Forces, sent as a part of United Nations peacekeeping operations, and Japanese private companies, who built bridges and water-supply systems.

Subsequently, NUD has been held annually, and in the fourth NUD in 2019, about 320 athletes participated in soccer, track and field, and volleyball. NUD's annual presence as the only nationwide sports event in South Sudan has caused it to build greater publicity. In the latest event, NUD received equipment and material support and funding from twelve organiza-



Action from the NUD soccer final

tions and groups, including UN organizations, the Swiss government, and private companies, as well as JICA. In addition, a total of as many as about 55,000 citizens gathered to enjoy the event.

During this sports event, workshops on peace-building, HIV/AIDS, gender, and fair play were held at the Juba Multi-Service Training Center, where players and coaches stayed. About 400 participants, including players, coaches and government-related officials, participated in these workshops to listen to lectures and discuss many issues, such as the prevention of conflict and the eradication of gender-based discrimination.

NUD brought great changes to players' awareness. According to questionnaires targeted at players, many of them had been hesitant to interact with

players of different regions or ethnicities before the event. But their answers indicated that they had developed a feeling of mutual trust and exchange after the event. Significant reasons for this, players noted, were "working hard together in a game" and "eating and sleeping together in the same accommodation."

Kanamori says, "Most players want to make it widely known that they were able to make friends with players of different ethnicities back home. It can be said that NUD has been a good opportunity to promote domestic peace. Citizens also found it significant that they were able to enjoy watching sports events without fighting and welcomed the improvement of the country's chances for peace through NUD."

Players who had excelled in the fourth NUD participated in international competitions held in Rwanda and Tanzania as South Sudanese national team members. Good performance in international competitions means a stronger possibility of competing in the Olympic Games. In this sense, NUD is an important athletic competition for athletes who aspire to compete on the world stage.

In the Tokyo 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games, we may be able to see great performances from athletes who took NUD as their opportunity to launch out into the world. 



At a workshop on peace-building, participants write personal messages of peace

All photos: Courtesy of Shinichi Kuno /JICA