

## Bosnia: Different Peoples, One Family

Written by Tzu Chi Foundation  
Friday, 11 December 2015 15:39

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A century ago, the assassination of the Austro-Hungarian crown prince Franz Ferdinand in Bosnia sparked World War I. The region has had its share of turmoil in the years since, its history littered with man-made or natural disasters. The new nation of Bosnia and Herzegovina gained independence in 1992 after the dissolution of Yugoslavia, only to be engulfed in a three-year civil war that left 200,000 people dead. Then in May 2014 came the worst flooding in over a century for the country. With unemployment levels sky high, many people there already had tough lives. The disaster only added insult to injury.

I set out for Munich, Germany, on October 15, 2014, traveling from Taipei, Taiwan, by way of Istanbul, Turkey. In Germany, I was going to join Tzu Chi volunteers in Europe for a trip to Bosnia (formally Bosnia and Herzegovina). Our mission was to distribute aid to flood victims.

I arrived at Istanbul International Airport at 5:00 in the morning of the 16th. Though it was still very early, crowds of people thronged the airport and automobiles packed the roadways outside while one airplane after another landed or took off. Constant noise filled the early morning air.

Istanbul, once the center of the Ottoman Empire, is now an international hub for air travel. At the zenith of its power in the 16th and 17th centuries, the empire controlled much of Western Asia, the Caucasus, North Africa, the Horn of Africa, and Southeast Europe, including the Balkan Peninsula, of which Bosnia was a part.

From 1867 to 1918, Bosnia was ruled by the Austro-Hungarian Empire, which collapsed as a result of defeat in World War I. The empire was divided into many countries, including Yugoslavia, of which Bosnia was a constituent. Bosnia gained independence after Yugoslavia disintegrated in 1992.

### **A path made rockier by floods**

Bosnia has had a rocky history since it declared independence. A three-year civil war followed, leaving thousands upon thousands of people dead, to say nothing of the damage to property and infrastructure. Afterwards, the nation needed to heal, rebuild, and make up for lost time.

Unfortunately, the economy has not picked up much in the 20 years since the war. "Unemployment, at 40 percent, is a thorny problem that we're trying very hard to solve," said Živko Budimir, President of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. He spoke to us in his small but well-kept office in Sarajevo, the national capital. The bright morning sunshine coming through the window spotlighted the resolve on his face.

However, before he could resolve the unemployment problem, the nation was devastated in May 2014 by the worst floods in over a century. Four in ten people in the nation were affected as the deluge submerged houses and roads and dealt a heavy blow to an already struggling economy.

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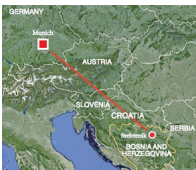
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The government was unable to help victims clean up their homes and neighborhoods. Some neighborhoods remained in disarray five months after the deluge. Bahri, 67 years old, lived alone near the Tinja River. During the catastrophe, the river spilled over its banks and inundated her home. Five months later, her house was still a scene of chaos and a musty smell pervaded the air.

Her messy home was representative of the dire situation in the disaster zone. The international community pledged one billion U.S. dollars in aid, but it had yet to reach the victims. People were still in distress, still waiting.

### Crossing borders



It was October 17, 2014, not yet 5:00 a.m. In the near-dawn darkness, shadows of people moved about in front of a house in a suburb of Munich, Germany. The light from the open garage provided illumination as the group of people hurried to and fro, loading things onto a large bus. A half hour later, the people boarded the bus and headed southeast toward Bosnia.

On the bus were 50 Tzu Chi volunteers from Germany, Italy, Austria, Great Britain, France, Ireland, Malaysia, and Taiwan. Also on board were a thousand blankets made from recycled PET bottles, 163,200 Euros (US\$203,000) worth of cash vouchers, copies of a letter of sympathy from Master Cheng Yen, copies of Jing Si Aphorisms (a collection of maxims by Master Cheng Yen), and small gifts. The group was scheduled to distribute the relief items to 332 families from the flood-hit towns of Srebrenik and Šamac in Bosnia.

The trip had been set in motion three months earlier. In July 2014, at the invitation of the Bosnian government, Tzu Chi volunteers in Munich visited the disaster area twice to assess flood damage. The distribution was a result of their findings.

In Srebrenik, landslides triggered by rainstorms had caused extensive damage. The town of Šamac, submerged for 17 days, was also hit hard; waterborne heavy metals from factories had polluted the soil, causing severe damage to agriculture. Many young people were forced to work in neighboring countries. Those who stayed behind were too old, too young, or did not have the financial means to clean up or repair their homes.

After their assessment trips to Bosnia, Tzu Chi volunteers began preparing goods for a relief distribution. Chen Shu-wei ( 陳樹偉 ), who lives in Germany, indicated that the wealth in Europe had generally made it harder for Tzu Chi volunteers there to find occasions where they might provide assistance. Besides, there were very few of them in Europe, spread out in various countries. It was not easy for them to get together and work on a project. That's why they cherished and seized the opportunity to help, even when one roadblock after another sprang up as they planned and prepared for the distribution. With volunteers from different countries putting aside their personal responsibilities and pitching in to help, they were able to pull

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everything together and overcome their obstacles.

It was more than 800 kilometers (500 miles) from Munich to Srebrenik. The volunteers had to cross Austria, Slovenia, and Croatia. The trip took 12 hours, but the group finally arrived in Srebrenik, Bosnia, in the late afternoon. After dinner they assembled to review the plans for the distribution slated to take place the next day. They wanted to make the event as successful as possible.

### Harmony



"There are three major religions in Bosnia: Islam, Serbian Orthodoxy, and Roman Catholicism," Chen Shu-wei observed. "Their respective adherents used to live in peace with one another. However, that changed when the civil war [1992-1995] cracked the concord and mutual respect between them." Chen said that in view of that history, Master Cheng Yen had expressed her hope that through the distribution Tzu Chi volunteers in Europe could help thaw the historical hatred and discord with warmth.

Bringing people from those three religious groups together for the distribution would be quite a challenge. Tzu Chi volunteers were unsure what might happen. German volunteer Rudolf Pfaff was so worried that he could not sleep a wink the night before the distribution.

The event venue was a theater with just one entrance. The help of local police was enlisted in case of disorder. Recipients were seated in three sections according to their religion. President Živko Budimir expressed his gratitude to Tzu Chi for gathering Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats together in the same room to receive help from the foundation.

The event started with volunteers leading those present in singing the English version of "Love and Care," a song popular in Tzu Chi. The volunteers hoped that everyone could use love to dissolve disasters and warm each other's heart. When the prayer began, each person in the theater prayed in their usual manner. President Budimir, a Catholic, made the sign of the cross. The mayor of Srebrenik, a Muslim, prayed with his palms open and facing up. Rudolf Pfaff folded his palms before his chest, as Buddhists do when they pray. Everyone was at ease with what they themselves were doing and what other groups were doing. What could have been an awkward moment turned out just fine—more than fine. It was solemn, peaceful, and touching.



The feared scenario that had kept Pfaff up all night did not materialize after all. The sympathy letters, cash vouchers, and blankets were distributed in perfect order before the sun sank below the horizon and took down the temperature with it.

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Temporary relief for 1,170 people in 332 families undoubtedly made only a small dent in the suffering that the great flood had inflicted on the nation. But this sincere effort to help had at least touched the lives of some people who were in need.

Receiving the goodwill from Tzu Chi, one Islamic lady expressed her gratitude to me. She said she wanted to thank the group of strangers for bringing love and care to Bosnia even though they shared no common ties in language, culture, or religion with local people. She did not understand why they had done it, but she was sincerely grateful to them for giving her a glimmer of hope at a time in her life when she was feeling most helpless.

Her appreciation was a shot in the arm for the volunteers and strengthened their resolve to continue helping flood victims in that area in the not-too-distant future. After all, to many Tzu Chi volunteers, seeing people suffer is like seeing their own family suffer. We all live on the same Earth, and it is fitting to give a helping hand to those in need, whoever and wherever they may be. By joining Tzu Chi, volunteers have committed themselves to bringing love to the less fortunate—a pure desire to relieve suffering and live out the great loving-kindness of the bodhisattvas.

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