World's children join hands to ban mines

Children from 11 countries will get together in Japan in August for a summit to explore ways to eliminate land mines from the face of the Earth.

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The meeting in Shin-Asahi, Shiga Prefecture, will be an international version of the "Ban Land Mines, All-Japan Children's Summit" held last year with the support of the town.

Based on an international convention banning antipersonnel mines, known as the Ottawa Treaty, the Japanese government has disposed of land mines in its arsenal by detonating them, mainly in Shin-Asahi.

The other day, I wrote about the global picture of land-mine holdings prior to the signing of the convention in 1997. Japan has since destroyed its landmines, except for those it keeps for research and training purposes. But worldwide, there are still about 200 million mines.

Britain and France are among countries that have halted the production and stockpiling of mines. On the other hand, the United States, China and Russia continue to manufacture them.

Some mines specifically target children. These are nicknamed "butterfly mines." The way they fall after being dropped from helicopters is said to resemble butterflies, with the speed of their descent being slowed by two protruding blades.

In his book on butterfly mines, Gino Strada, an Italian who has worked as a surgeon in Afghanistan and in other parts of the world, says without exception, those he treated for injuries associated with butterfly mines, were children. (A Japanese translation has been published by Kinokuniya Shoten.) Teaching children how to keep clear of land mines is an important and necessary part of volunteer work. The Association for Aid and Relief, Japan, a nongovernmental organization that has worked for the relief of Angolan refugees in Zambia, provides such information to both adults and children at churches, marketplaces and even under the shade of mango trees.

"What does this look like?" "Maybe a lunch box." In makeshift classrooms, local staff members help children to understand the menace by raising cloth pieces on which the many types of mines are drawn. Instructors also use songs and puppet dramas to get the point across.

Delegates to this month's world summit against land mines in Shin-Asahi will include boys from Angola and Afghanistan who lost their hands or legs after stepping on unexploded mines.

For the participating Japanese children, the important thing is to get acquainted with these young people who are forced to live with the aftereffects of mine explosions.

Taking time out to attend the summit will be an important and commendable way to make their summer holidays significant.

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