

Report from the World Human Rights Cities Forum in Gwangju

Gwangju is the birthplace of modern democracy in Korea. On May 18, 1980, students there demonstrated peacefully against the national dictatorship. The government responded with violence and severe oppression, but rather than shrink back, virtually the whole population of Gwangju rose up to defend the students and demand freedom. This uprising was crushed initially, at tremendous cost in suffering and death, but it was a decisive moment for the movement that eventually overthrew the dictatorship and brought democracy to the Korean Peninsula.

Since that time, Gwangju has faithfully and solemnly remembered May 18. They remember the cruel military dictatorship that oppressed them. They remember the martyrs who died, and they remember their own courageous commitment to human rights and freedom. This year, Hiroshima and Mayors for Peace were invited to attend the first Human Rights Cities Forum, which was hosted by Gwangju May 15 to 18, 2011.

Attending the forum on behalf of Hiroshima's Mayor Matsui was Steve Leeper, chairman of the Hiroshima Peace Culture Foundation, which houses the Mayors for Peace secretariat. Leeper served as a panelist in Panel A, one of two breakout sessions that took place in the morning of May 16. Other presenters in that session included mayors of Penang (Malaysia) and Alesan (Philippines) as well as representatives from Kaohsiung (Taiwan), Washington DC (US), Mexico City (Mexico) and New York (US). At that session, Leeper presented a brief message from Mayor Matsui and added comments about the organization and campaign tactics of Mayors for Peace.

Although Leeper's presentation differed from others in that it did not directly describe Hiroshima's efforts for human rights, it was clearly relevant to the World Human Rights Cities Forum, which is an effort to involve cities in the promotion of human rights. The participants were also clearly supportive of the campaign to eliminate nuclear weapons and the scourge of war. Encountering several mayors and NGO representatives who offered concrete ways to cooperate with Mayors for Peace, Leeper reported great potential for collaboration with the global human rights community.