



# LEAVING THE AMERICAN SECTOR

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## **Leaving the American Sector**

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## **THE BALKANS: TRAGEDY** **IN KOSOVO**

It is difficult to write about our ministry in Kosovo and the Balkans without delving into a little history. Everyone who has studied the Balkans has an opinion about who is right and who is wrong. It is not my intent to give an opinion about whether or not the Kosovar Albanians have a right to the land or not. My desire is to illustrate how I feel the Lord led me there and how He directed our steps.

Not many people know where the Balkans are or where Kosovo is in particular. Christians who read their New Testament know about Macedonia and the church in Thessalonica. This region, the northern part of Greece, continuing north through former Yugoslavia, up to Hungary, and over to Albania, Romania and Bulgaria make up what we call the Balkans.

The Balkans were dominated by the Turks during the Ottoman Empire for over 500 years, but today it is a melting pot of the world's major religions. Eastern Orthodoxy, Roman Catholicism, and Islam all collide in this churning region of ethnic violence. Stated differently, this is where three

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empires intersect: the Ottoman Empire (Muslim Turks); the Byzantine Empire (Eastern Christians); and the Roman Empire (Western Christians).

Albania once had a proud Christian heritage. The apostle Paul visited them to share the Gospel in the first decades of the faith. Albania was then the Roman province of Illyricum that is mentioned in Romans 15:19. However, the Turks, who led the Ottoman Empire, conquered the region in 1389 in a fierce battle on the Plains of Kosovo. As a result, the Albanians adopted the Muslim religion but the Serbians did not. It is best to make a clear distinction at this point—Albanians are moderate or secularized Muslims, very unlike those in today's Middle East.



Fast-forward to 1998 and the Serbian ruler at the time, Slobodan Milosevic. After failed campaigns to establish the dominance of Greater Serbia in Croatia and Bosnia, Milosevic turned his attention to Kosovo. Tensions were on the rise and para-military units from both sides were clandestinely killing each other. Out of this cauldron of hate came great human suffering. During the early winter of 1999 the Serbian army made its final move into Kosovo to once and for all ethnically cleanse this cherished Serbian region and force two million Kosovar Albanians out of the area.

By mid-April 1999, over 700,000 Kosovar refugees were forced out of their homes into neighboring Macedonia, Albania, or into the surrounding mountains. Our EEO missionaries in Tirana, Albania—Bob and Eva Durham—were helping Kosovar refugee families, and were overwhelmed by the needs they saw.

In an effort to determine firsthand how EEO could help more effectively, Pastor Kevin Doyle and I, along with a work group from his church, traveled to Tirana.

In assessing the situation we went to the Tirana Sports

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Palace. It was actually a run-down gymnasium with a concrete floor. It had become the new home for 3,000 Kosovar refugees who were sitting on wall-to-wall blankets. Each family had their own blanket.

Ramsia and Shevria, sisters who had married brothers, had been there for a month already. Ramsia's five children were listless and were huddled around mom. A lack of toilet and bathing facilities contributed to the severe stench of human flesh packed into the gymnasium in hot weather. Kevin and I sat down on their blanket and listened as Ramsia told us their story.

"Our husbands are still somewhere in the hills. We haven't heard anything about them since the night they started shelling our little village over a month ago."

Ramsia began to cry and continued, "When the Serbian troops came one of them grabbed my five-year-old son, Gentrit. I screamed and grabbed him right back. The soldier demanded 200 German marks (about \$100), took his gun out, and laughed. We were so scared. Somebody paid this money for me. We walked 75 kilometers over hills and valleys to the Albanian border town of Kukes. From there, a refugee transport brought us to Tirana and this gymnasium." She looked at her children and put her head down, lost in her thoughts.

The first order of business was to get the two women, their children and the grandparents out of that horrible gymnasium. We found an apartment for them and in a matter of days had helped provide a little dignity to this grieving family.

Churches in Tirana were supplying bread to refugee families, and sharing the love of Christ with them in both word and deed. Just ten years before Albania had been an atheistic nation, and now they were evangelizing their ethnic cousins. I marveled at how the Lord had opened the door for the gospel to the Kosovar people.

After ten days in Tirana, helping hundreds of refugee families, we returned to the United States determined to help

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further. My wife Paula and I, along with another couple, Brad and Debbie Warren, were not able to return until July 2nd. The war had ended a week earlier, on June 24, 1999. The air war against Serbia lasted 78 days and resulted in a cease-fire between the warring factions. The U.N. moved troops in to keep the peace and today Kosovo, like Bosnia, is governed by the U.N.

Paula and I met with the Durhams to review how they had been helping the refugees in our absence. Eva Durham said, "Jeff, the Begajs returned to Kosovo a few days ago. One of their brothers located them, came here to Tirana, and they all took the bus back. However, they left their address in case we wanted to come visit." Eva handed me a piece of paper.

I looked at the paper. There was one word, "Banje." This was the name of their village, which didn't appear on any maps. Ramsia left instructions for us to find the town of Malisheve, and once we did, to ask there how to find Banje. In her mind, I am sure this type of navigation seemed normal, but for me, it served to increase my apprehension about entering a war zone while not knowing exactly where we were going.

My partner Brad and I filled our rented van with food, blankets, and clothing. Our driver, a local Albanian, spoke little English but had driven the treacherous road to Kosovo before. With the word "Banje" in my pocket, Brad and I said goodbye to our wives and headed for Kosovo.

The poorly paved roads of Albania were crowded with determined refugees navigating the potholes as they streamed back to their homeland. Buses, vans and tractors pulling open flatbed trailers filled the narrow mountainous road leading eastward.

Our refugee caravan came to a stop after eight torturous hours crawling over the mountains of Albania. "Excuse me, but what are the soldiers doing there? Why are we being detained?" I asked a British soldier.

"They are removing land mines, sir, planted along the

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road you are traveling. I suggest sir that you do not leave the road, do not drive on the shoulder, and do not go out on the dirt roads into the villages. We have reports of thousands of small landmines," he said in a crisp formal tone. A few moments later we heard explosions as two landmines were detonated.

We followed a U.N. convoy past the long line of refugees and crossed over to Kosovo, arriving at Prizren about 6 p.m. that evening. We had been on the road for 14 hours.



"Where are we going to stay?" the driver asked in broken English. Hotels and businesses were not open. Shop windows were destroyed, buildings burned, and there was no electricity in the city. Actually, we later discovered there was no electricity in the entire country.

A German missionary friend in Tirana, Hans, had given me an address in Prizren, a southern Kosovo town, and we agreed to try to meet there later that week. I felt that we should go there and see if we could help them. As it turned out, we found the address and the home was owned by a woman, Mrs. Qafleshi, and it was the only house on her street that had not been destroyed by the Serbian army. Upon learning we were Americans, she insisted we sleep there.

A young man down the street named Jakup came over to translate for us. He implored us to come with him to meet his father and have tea with his family.

We followed him and saw a U.N.-issue refugee tent was set up on the grass in front of what used to be their family home. Three families had lived in a nice two-story home, which was now only ashes and rubble. Their only crime had been to be ethnic Albanian.

Jakup's father was thrilled to see us. He related the great losses his family had suffered and told us in detail about the

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great suffering that all Kosovars had experienced.

Several neighborhood children followed us to Jakup's house, hoping to hear Brad play the guitar he carried. The kids sang along and had a favorite song they wanted to sing. On that warm July evening, we sat outside by the moonlight, surrounded by destruction, and sang of freedom.

*Although we've had pain,  
Although we've been suffering,  
Although we've experienced death,  
We now have freedom,  
You are free Kosova  
We can be free.*

"You've done so much for us," Jakup's father said when the children left that night.

I said, "No, we feel so deeply for you. We're here to help, but we really haven't done anything yet, although we'd like to."

"You Americans don't know how much you have done for us," he replied. "Just today, you brought music back into our lives. Our children can sing again. The past 10 years we've been under heavy oppression from the Serbian police. We couldn't go out after dark unless we had a reason. Many of us watched our homes, and our dreams, burn to the ground. We could not sing songs about Kosovo. Our children could not study in college. We could not drive without paying bribes to police. But tonight you have brought children into my yard to sing, and I thank you for that. You have done so much for us."

Humbled and tired, Brad, Jakup and I walked back to the Qafleshi home. I asked Jakup if he would like to work with us for a few days. "Jakup," I asked, "do you happen to know where Malisheve or Banje is?"

"I know where Malisheve is, but I don't know about Banje. No problem, we will find it tomorrow!" he said with confidence.

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Late that night machine gun fire sprayed into the sky outside our gate. I dove out of bed onto the floor, our window open to the courtyard and street below. I thought we were under attack from a sniper. After a fitful night of rest, we learned in the morning the weapons had been fired by celebrating Kosovar soldiers.



The next day we departed for Malisheve with Jakup as our guide. We had been on the road about ten minutes when we came upon some people and a soldier on a hillside next to the road. We got out and found pieces of clothing half-buried in lumpy ground. The locals said it was a mass grave.

One man said in German, "Serbian troops came through this village and had forced everyone out of their homes. Women and children were forced down one road and men brought here. They had to dig their own graves and then were shot. I lost nine family members. My uncles are buried here."

We crossed the road and walked over to what used to be his home. Amid the rubble were fifteen bullet holes in the brick wall of the charred kitchen. "This is where they shot my family," he said, pointing at the wall. A blackened skull and bones lay nearby. Half a driver's license lay under the waste. We left some food for him and his neighbors, and after praying together said our goodbyes.

Finally we reached Malisheve and we discovered about eighty percent of the town had been destroyed. Every building was charred and blackened. Major fighting had taken place in the area because the Malisheve region was a stronghold of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA).

Jakup asked for directions to Banje, and we found it was just a few miles up the road. "Go to the NATO tank parked on the road and turn right. That will be in Banje!" the man said.

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I thought about the warning by the British soldier about landmines, but also observed that other vehicles drove down the dirt road with no problem, so we turned right and drove a few miles into the countryside.

When we reached the outskirts of the village we stopped to ask directions to the house. "Excuse me, do you know where the Begaj family lives?" Jakup asked.

"Which one?" There are many Begaj families here."

"Isuf Begaj," I said.

"Oh, Isuf. Go to the end of the road; that will be his house," the man said. We thanked him and gave him some chocolate for his children.

Isuf is Albanian for Joseph. I had never met Isuf, only his wife Ramsia, his father Iliaz, and his five children. He and his brother had been in the mountains the entire three months of the war. We pulled up to the gate of a house, but they were all clustered together and I wasn't sure if we were at the right place.

A man walked out. When he saw me enter the gate, he paused. Although we had never met, he recognized me from a photograph. "Americans! Americans! Jeff!" he shouted.

He yelled inside the house, and soon the entire clan rushed out to greet us. Ramsia, her sister Shevria, the grandparents, and all the children flooded out of the house. The kids ran with their arms outstretched and Ramsia cried. We all hugged and cried in one big circle in the dirt of their courtyard. Isuf slapped me on the back and hugged me. We could never have imagined this day when we all sat on the gymnasium floor in Tirana.



Jakup and Isuf became our co-workers in Kosovo, assisting us in every area. Isuf's home had been damaged but not destroyed, and it became our base of operations for providing relief to Kosovar families.

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We quickly learned that if you called yourself a Christian it was like calling yourself a Serbian. The Serbian religion is Eastern Orthodox Christianity and Kosovars did not understand that one could be a Christian without being Orthodox.

We became good listeners, and shared Christ's love with the widows and orphans through our actions. We used words when appropriate.

Isuf, Jakup and I walked through many villages determining who needed help. We focused on the widows and the poorer families. One man, Rramin Krasniqi, was simply grateful that someone would take the time to listen to him. We sat on small plastic seats in front of his tent in the village of Hoce Vogel as he shared the story of the suffering he had endured.

He started with words of appreciation. "Thank you for your help. You know, I have never needed help from anyone before. My sons have worked with me in the fields and we could always take care of ourselves. Do you know what happened to us?" Mr. Krasniqi looked down, lost in his thoughts, and continued without waiting for an answer.

"Late the night of March 25th I heard people running and yelling that the Serbs were coming. I told my son Valon to take his mother and brother in the car right away, and I would stay with the house. I wanted to get supplies ready and set our cows free. At 5 a.m. that morning, I heard screaming and troops opened fire on our homes. Five old men began waving white flags, to show that there were no KLA fighters in our village. The troops forced everyone out of their homes and into the road. The wounded were shot to death.

"They told us to leave the country and never come back. About 150 of us began walking down the road towards Albania with soldiers firing their guns in the air and pulling women out of the crowd. We walked all day, the crowd getting bigger all the time. There were hundreds of us by nightfall and we stopped in an abandoned village and entered homes. The women and children wanted to sleep while we stood guard outside in the fields.

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"Many of the Serbian soldiers didn't wear uniforms. They were really just regular people from the neighboring Serb villages. I recognized two of the boys because they had played with my son. They forced us into the houses. I found my family hiding in one of the houses. They made us men strip naked and stole all of our money. They said to go to sleep, that nobody would hurt us.

"My son Valon was 16 and wanted to sleep outside in the car with his friends. People were sleeping everywhere, in cars and in the fields. At 1:30 a.m. my wife woke up and checked on Valon who was sleeping in our car. At 1:45 she heard aircraft but I was sleeping. The next thing I knew, I woke up covered in concrete and broken glass. The Serbs were bombing us as we slept. I pushed the rubble off, checked on my wife, and tried to go down the stairs, except they were gone. I jumped down from the 2nd floor onto the broken concrete slab. I ran to the car and saw Valon."

"Daddy, are we still alive?" he asked me.

"Son, yes, we are all alive. How are you?"

"Dad, I am okay I think, but my arms and legs feel dead."

"The door was jammed and when I reached in the broken window to try and pull him out, his arms were only hanging by threads of flesh. I tried to tie up his arms to stop bleeding, but I couldn't."

Rramin wiped his eyes and continued.

"Valon, I can't open the door."

"That's okay Dad." he said. "Be strong, and tell Mom I love her... say goodbye for me...."



Warriors and scholars continue to debate the rightness of one side or the other in the Serb-Kosovo conflict. Each side contends that the other was acting illegally, that the opposing side was responsible for more atrocities than the other. Some even think the NATO intervention was the most brutal act of all.

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I was drawn into this debate most recently in the summer of 2004 when an article by Dr. Paul Mojzes, professor of Religious Studies at Rosemont College in Rosemont, Pennsylvania, appeared in the influential *East-West Church and Ministry Report*.

Professor Mojzes presented what I felt was a rather unbalanced view of events in Kosovo, focusing only on the destruction of churches and holy places in Kosovo by ethnic Albanians, but almost completely ignoring the fact that many of these acts were retribution against Serbians who had committed atrocities against Kosovars in the name of Christ.

Of course, there was no justification for the violence on either side, but it troubled me that Dr. Mojzes, like so many other Christians, had taken sides in the conflict, and I felt it was perhaps politically motivated.

The one factor that has always concerned me was that Serbians consider themselves Christians, yet they were responsible for some pretty diabolical acts in the name of Christ.

As you might imagine, this made it difficult for us to minister to the Muslims of Kosovo. We came in the name of Christ too, and they thought we might kill them. It took hard work and prayers to build trust with the Kosovar Muslims before we could minister to them. We had to explain that as evangelical Christians, we were very different from the members of the Serbian Orthodox Church that had been slaughtering their families. Thankfully, there were many Kosovar Muslims that could look beyond the politics to see the love and mercy of Jesus Christ, and they embraced the Lord as a result.

Dr. Mark Elliott, editor of *East-West Church and Ministry Report*, printed my concerns, and that seemed to generate more heat than light. In my letter, I said, "...one definitely detects a pro-Serbian slant to every single issue [Dr. Mojzes] mentioned.... I would hope that the *East-West Church and Ministry Report* would either stay out of partisan politics, or at least provide opposing viewpoints."

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Sadly, my call for a balanced perspective fell on deaf ears. Many Christians feel a need to be on the "right" side of an argument, forgetting there are souls at stake, not just ideologies.



Through the dedication of sponsors we have been able to help many families in Kosovo. Isuf Begaj still works with us part-time. Jakup worked with us for several years and now works in Prizren. He has three beautiful children and Isuf and Ramsia now have six. In many ways, life has returned to normal except for the ethnic tension, which is always just under the surface.

Our friends, Randy and Lycia Harvey, went to Kosovo as EEO missionaries and have started a growing church in Malisheve, so the seeds of our ministry continue to produce fruit. We also provide food to poverty-stricken families there.

The work of evangelism is a tough one in Kosovo. With a largely Muslim population, most people are reluctant to leave the religion of their fathers and grandfathers. It takes time to build trust and friendships in this part of the world.

At EEO, we continue to remember the widow and the orphan, to reach out to the poor and needy. We pray that all of our labor is contributing to the building up of the Body of Christ in Kosovo.

One night as I prayed in a circle, holding hands with six widowed mothers and their 19 children, I thought of Psalm 68. The Scripture says: "A father of the fatherless and a defender of the widow, is God in His holy habitation."

I prayed, "Lord, we ask that you would be a father to these children and a defender of these widows. And if you are calling us to be that line of defense for them, Lord, we want to be in obedience to Your Word. Please make Your presence, and Your love, real to these children and their mothers."

God has called EEO to remember the poor, the widow, and the orphan in Kosovo. To remember them means to

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defend them. To defend them means to care for them. We will continue to do so as long as He leads us to do so.