

# Why Albania embraces Bush

**THE PRESIDENT** gets a warm welcome as he wraps up a European tour.

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CORRESPONDENT

**TIRANA, ALBANIA** - Dogged by protest for much of his European tour, President Bush received a warmer welcome Sunday in Albania, a former communist country eager to show that it remains one of America's staunchest allies.

Tirana, the capital, was festooned with giant American flags and the president was greeted by Albanians in red-white-and-blue Uncle Sam top hats. Mr. Bush, the first sitting president to visit Albania, traveled down a boulevard renamed in his honor.

"We have come to give our hearts

to America and to President Bush to say that we are with them in the war on terrorism and we appreciate what they have done for Kosovo and for Albanians," says Arjanit Iljazi, a nurse who waited for hours to catch a glimpse of Bush in a central square Sunday morning.

Albanians see this weekend's visit, the second-to-last stop on the president's Eastern European tour, as a reward for their country's staunch pro-American sentiment and its support of US antiterrorism efforts. It's sent troops to Iraq and Afghanistan, frozen the assets of suspected terrorist-financiers, and taken in eight former Guantánamo Bay detainees whom no other country would take in.

"There is a strong feeling of gratefulness that the Albanian people nourish towards the United States, whether it be their politicians or people," says Ferit Hoxha, secretary general of the Albanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

## Roots of pro-American sentiment

The roots of Albanian pro-American sentiment, people here say, date to Woodrow Wilson's support of the country's independence after World War I and were cemented during the 1999 NATO intervention in Kosovo, a majority ethnic Albanian province of Serbia. Albanians also see the US as the strongest advocate for the independence of Kosovo, whose status is due to be reviewed by the UN Security Council this month.

Although Albania's contribution to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are numerically small - 120 troops in Mosul, and 30 in Afghanistan with an additional 110 to come soon - they have a symbolic importance for the US. The US sees Albania as a model of moderate Islam and religious tolerance. Officially 70 percent Muslim, the country has a strong secular ethos after nearly a quarter of a century of state-enforced atheism under communism.

"I appreciated the fact that Albania is a model of religious tolerance," Bush said in a press conference with the Albanian prime minister. "And I appreciate the fact that Albania is a trusted friend and a strong ally."

## Even in mosques, they love US

Pro-American sentiment is widespread here, even among Albania's Muslim faithful. At the historic Ottoman-era Ethem Bey mosque in central Tirana, the worshipers emerging from midday prayers last week said they welcomed President Bush.

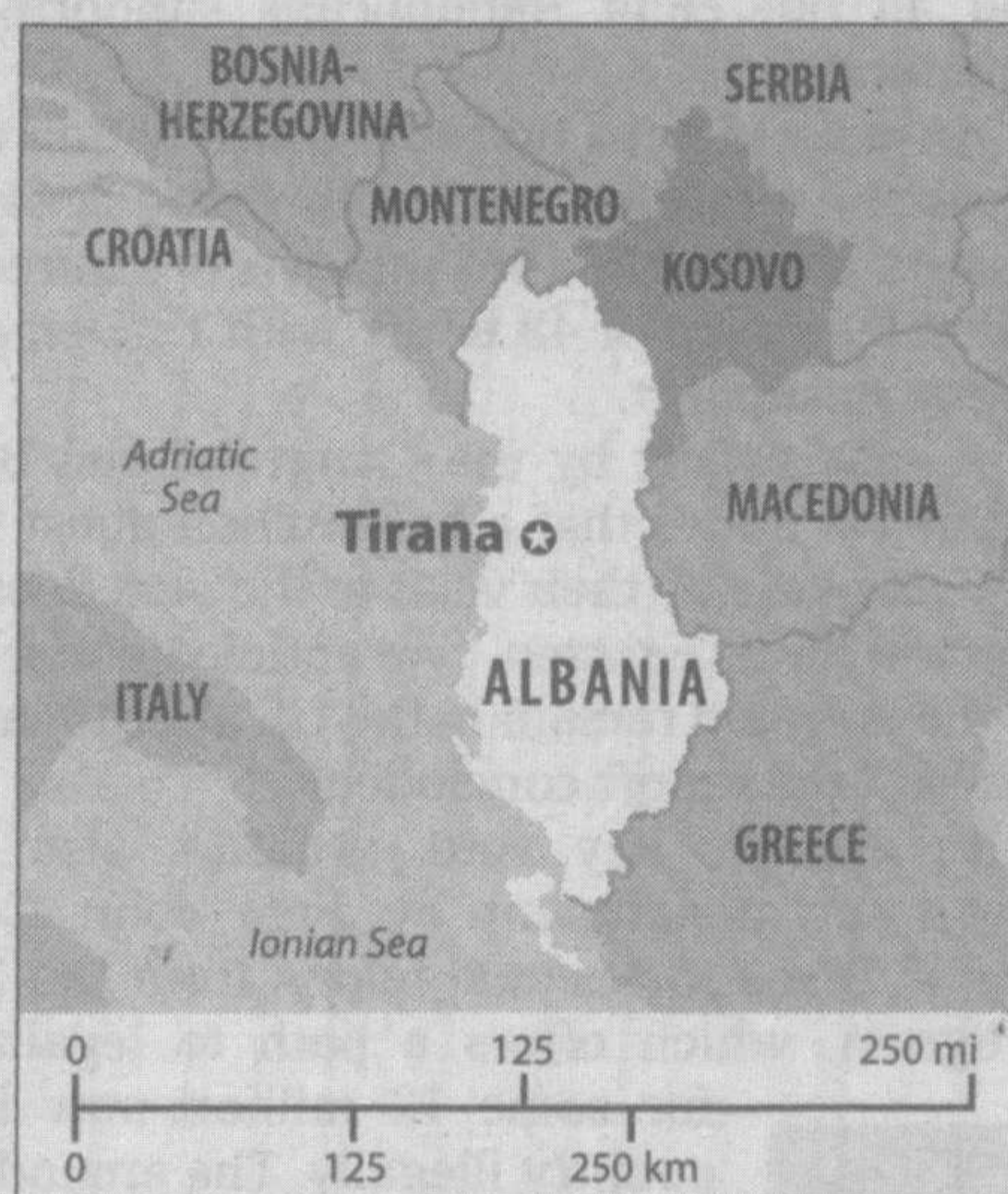
Few of the men were bearded and many of the women's heads were uncovered; during prayers they borrowed scarves from a plastic bag near the entrance.

"We want better relations between the two countries," says the mosque's

imam, Shaban Saliq, who is also the mufti - the highest Sunni Muslim leader - of Tirana and looks very much like the professor of geophysics he once was. "Everyone is grateful for what the Americans did in Kosovo."

Mr. Saliq does not support the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan - the Koran forbids killing, he says - but still supports the US.

On the streets, other Albanians



RICH CLABAUGH - STAFF

expressed mixed opinions about the military campaigns there. But there is little public debate in Albania about their government's support of the wars, and it's difficult to find anyone in Tirana, politician or ordinary person, who has anything bad to say about America.

"I think the sentiment is pro-American rather than pro-Bush," says Endri Fuga, director of communications for Mjaft! Movement, one of Albania's largest activist organizations. For many Albanians who remember communism, he says, America still represents the ideal of freedom and democracy.

## Poor country with high hopes

During the communist era, Albania was perhaps the most isolated and underdeveloped country in Europe. The country is still one of the poorest on the continent, but since the end of communism in 1992 it has allied itself closely with America and Western Europe.

The country hopes to gain NATO membership in 2008 and, eventually, to win a place in the European Union.

Bush reiterated the United States' support of Albania's NATO bid and emphasized that he is committed to Kosovo gaining its independence.

Seremb Gjergjaj, who drove more than six hours from Kosovo with friends in hopes of catching a glimpse of the president, says he came to thank Bush for America's support and that Kosovars would be patient.

"We have a saying in Kosovo that good things come slow."

## From Gitmo cell to 'freedom' in Albania

**TIRANA, ALBANIA** - Abu Muhammad arrived in Albania tied to his seat and guarded by armed American soldiers. The choice when he arrived, he says, was stark: accept asylum in Albania - one of the Europe's poorest nations - or return to Guantánamo Bay, where he spent more than four years as a detainee.

"There's nothing here. You cannot find a job. You cannot find something for your family," he says, speaking at a Tirana restaurant.

Mr. Muhammad's strange, five-year odyssey has taken him from Pakistan, where he had been granted refugee status by the United Nations refugee agency, to Guantánamo, and finally here to a refugee center on the outskirts of Tirana.

One of eight former Guantánamo detainees cleared by the US military and granted asylum by the Albanian government at the request of the US, Muhammad - who uses a pseudonym because he fears retribution against his family in Algeria - is now trapped in a country where he doesn't speak the language and there is little infrastructure for helping refugees resettle.

But while Albania may hardly be the ideal destination for the eight people released, 30 to 40 other detainees remain cleared to leave but stuck in Guantánamo.

"There are several dozen other people like the men in Albania - refugees who fled persecution in their own countries yet ended

up in Guantánamo because they were picked up in the chaos of war," says Emi MacLean, a legal fellow at the Center for Constitutional Rights, which is representing Muhammad in a lawsuit against former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and other military personnel. "Now, they're trapped in Guantánamo because they can't go home and no other country will accept them."

An Algerian national, Muhammad was living in Pakistan - where he says he was working as a teacher for a nongovernmental organization - when police came to his door in the middle of the night. They were looking for another man, he says, but took him away anyway "for verification."

That was the last time he saw his five children and then-pregnant wife. He has a daughter, now 5, whom he has never seen.

A doctor by training, Muhammad speaks English, Arabic, and French - all softly - and shows no rage at the US. He says he is happy to be free but he sees little future for himself in Albania. He gets food, accommodation, and a small stipend from the government, but jobs are scarce and he despairs of ever bringing his family.

"Bring my family? Where?" he says. "They say they will give you one house with two rooms for two persons. How can I take my family in one room? I have six children."

Officially, the US says Muhammad is "no longer" an enemy combatant, but lawyers representing him say there is no evidence that he ever posed a threat to the US. He was held for an additional 18 months in Guantánamo after being cleared by an internal panel before being transferred to Albania against his will in November 2006.

Now he spends his time trolling the Internet, to catch up on five years of missed news, and looking for jobs. He hopes eventually to move to a French or Arabic-speaking country and be reunited with his family.

- N.I.