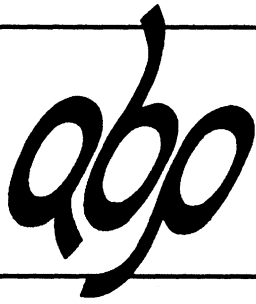


Nashville, Tennessee



Associated  
Baptist Press

Editor: Bob Allen  
Executive editor: Greg Warner

Phone: 800.340.6626  
Fax: 904.262.7745  
E-mail: bob@abpnews.com

May 25, 1999

(99-43)

**IN THIS ISSUE:**

- ☐ **Baptist Foundation of Albania becomes focal point for ministry**
- ☐ **Baptist Union of Albania organizes with four churches**
- ☐ **Texas Baptist school to launch 'virtual university' on Internet**
- ☐ **Emergency funding package offers aid for Kosovars, Central America**

**Baptist Foundation of Albania  
becomes focal point for ministry**

By Martha Skelton

TIRANA, Albania (ABP) -- An extended family of dozens of men, women and children cook on a bare floor while sitting on lawn chairs in an otherwise empty room an Albanian family has opened to them. They accept with gratitude several boxes of food, foam mattresses and blankets brought to them by a pastor and volunteers from a local Baptist church.

A small handicapped boy, whose father had to carry him on the long walk from their village in Kosovo to Albania, is measured in a Christian clinic for a new wheelchair.

A refugee camp in Tirana is set up around a swimming pool complex. It desperately needs a kitchen to feed several thousand refugees. The major relief agency running the camp calls for a man they heard could help, a Baptist missionary in the area who has been working for several years to help local Albanians develop businesses making tile and cement blocks. He oversees construction of the kitchen in half the time they expect. The materials, training and people were already in place, the missionary explains.

A network of evangelical groups have gathered around the Baptist Foundation of Tirana to coordinate a Christ-centered response to needs of more than 400,000 Kosovar refugees estimated to have entered Albania in the last few months.

When they can pause to reflect, they marvel at God's timing not only in the past frantic weeks but also months and years before.

Eight years ago, the European Baptist Federation launched an effort to begin Baptist work in Albania. The result was the Baptist Foundation of Tirana, an organizational structure that has become a focal point for cooperation among evangelical groups that have arrived in Albania in response to the refugee emergency.

Organizations including the Baptist World Alliance, Salvation Army and several national Baptist groups -- among them the U.S.-based International Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship -- have worked through the Foundation to provide funds needed locally to buy food, supplies and other essentials of a refugee ministry.

From the early days of the refugee crisis, Baptists through BFT established that they didn't talk, they acted. When 20 tons of flour arrived for a modest refugee ministry in Albania last year, Jonathan Steeper, director of the Baptist Center in Tirana, put it in a warehouse until it was needed. When the first refugees swarmed across the border in Kukes, Albania, last March, a call went out for help, and Baptists loaded the flour on trucks and headed for Kukes.

A government spokesman there said to Bekim Beka, "The Baptists are the first to come with food, not promises."

Beka, a young Kosovar pastor, left his home for Albania and began a new ministry with Baptists in Tirana last year. A refugee himself, Beka was already in place when the crisis came and is directing the Baptist refugee effort for Kosovars.

Statistics are constantly changing, but a recent weekly report from the Foundation included distribution of 736 food boxes (each designed to feed up to four people), soap, baby food and hygiene products, 1,097 mattresses, 2,024 blankets and 771 packets of disposable diapers.

Items are distributed to families who live with host Albanian families that otherwise cannot afford to feed them. The refugees are located through registration lists, and divided into geographic areas. The pastors and church volunteers from those areas take the aid items to the families. There are 16 churches taking aid to 5,000 refugees.

In association with other Christian agencies, most notably the Salvation Army, the Baptist Foundation of Tirana is also helping to feed thousands of refugees in camps around Tirana and soon also in other areas of Albania.

Various missions organizations are active as part of the effort. The International Mission Board has provided \$135,000 for refugee aid. Missionary Lee Bradley and a team of workers left their work in Bosnia to come to Tirana and set up the warehouse where the food boxes are assembled and distributed.

Baptist Missionary Society in Great Britain has both missionaries and volunteers working through churches and specialized ministries such as the ABC Medical Clinic in Tirana, which offers free medical care and medicine to refugees. Many arriving in Albania had to flee without their diabetes or heart medicine or eyeglasses, said Yvonne Wheeler, a BMS missionary nurse.

Her husband, missionary David Wheeler, works with the tile-and-cement-block -making endeavor. Albania's economy was so bad that early church-planting efforts were hindered by younger men emigrating to find work. The goal was to provide local jobs and contribute to church stability. When the refugee camp at Tirana called on Wheeler to build the kitchen, "We had the blocks ready, the warehouse ready, the lorry ready," he said. They built it in three weeks instead of the expected six. "We felt the Lord was in it," he added.

Spiritual needs are no less urgent than the physical.

Both Albanians and the refugees from Kosovo are ethnically identified as Muslims. Most Albanians are not religious in any sense, but attendance at mosques around the refugee areas has increased, because more Kosovars are practicing Muslims. Where there were 10 mosques in the country of Albania in 1990, there are now 1,500 new mosques built with outside money. Copies of the Koran are offered for free at the mosques.

Evangelicals helping the refugees also seek opportunities to tell them about the love of Christ expressed both in word and deed. Sometimes they are able to help by nothing more than sitting and listening as refugees talk about their experiences.

Alfred "Fred" Gollosi, an Albanian Baptist leader, recently made such a call to a refugee family in Tirana to whom he delivers food. Their story, told mainly by a middle-aged mother, is heart-rending.

From the village of Jakovica -- Kosovars call it Jakova -- she described how during the past few months her husband was taken away and shot. Then Serb soldiers came, burning homes and herding villagers

into two rooms of a house -- men in one room, women and children in the other. The building was then bombed. The woman's two teenage daughters were killed by the bombing -- one decapitated. She and a 13-year-old son escaped into nearby hills. They watched for hours as helicopters circled the village aiming to shoot anyone seen alive. They and other family members regrouped and fled to Albania.

They feel comfortable talking to Fredi and grateful for his help. "We are living on what you bring us," the woman tells him.

Some of the refugees have asked about the Christian faith and attended church services. A regular Kosovar worship service was scheduled to begin May 21 at the Baptist Center in Tirana.

Bekim Beka says now is the time for people called to work with Kosovars to make the long-term commitment to come to Albania and learn the language and culture while working with the refugees. Then when the refugees return to Kosovo, the new workers can go along as part of a church-planting effort there.

-30-

### **Baptist Union of Albania organizes with four churches**

TIRANA, Albania (ABP) -- Four churches organized as the Baptist Union of Albania May 1. Delegates elected officers and adopted a constitution, statement of faith and a resolution about the Kosovar refugee situation.

New officers include Bekim Beka of Tirana, general secretary, and Adnan Pula of Tirana, president.

Member churches include the Freedom Baptist Church and Way of Hope Baptist Church, both in Tirana; the Baptist Church in Bregu i Lumit; the Good News Baptist Church in Lezhe.

A resolution cited "the utterly tragic predicament" of refugees from Kosovo. It expressed "sincere solidarity" with refugees and hope for "a just settlement of the Kosovar conflict" that would allow refugees to return to their homes.

-30-

-- By ABP staff, with reporting European Baptist Press Service

### **Texas Baptist school to launch 'virtual university' on Internet**

DALLAS (ABP) -- Dallas Baptist University will launch a "virtual university" in cyberspace May 31, officials announced Monday (May 24).

The university will link with eCollege.com to offer "anytime, anywhere" courses via the Internet.

The virtual university will offer both an undergraduate and a master's degree in business administration on the World Wide Web, said Kay Shelton, faculty systems coordinator. Six courses will go online this summer and eight more this fall, she said.

The Dallas school has been experimenting with online learning since the fall of 1998, officials said. Online courses provide students an opportunity to complete degrees at a distance. They are most popular with adult learners who are unable to leave careers to study on campus, officials said.

-30-

-- By ABP staff

## **Emergency funding package offers aid for Kosovars, Central America**

By Larry Chesser

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- President Clinton signed legislation May 21 providing \$2 billion in humanitarian assistance for refugees fleeing Kosovo and to help Central America recover from Hurricanes Mitch and Georges.

The assistance was part of the \$15 billion Emergency Supplemental Appropriations Act that cleared the House May 18 and the Senate two days later.

Most of the package was earmarked for NATO military operations against Yugoslavia and for U.S. military pay raises. In addition to the overseas humanitarian assistance, the package also include \$574 million for distressed U.S. farmers and \$900 million to aid victims of recent tornadoes in Oklahoma, Kansas and other parts of the Midwest.

The package includes \$1.1 billion in humanitarian assistance for the approximately 750,000 ethnic Albanians who have fled Kosovo in recent months. That figure includes \$150 million to assist countries near Kosovo that have been affected by the influx of refugees.

The bill includes approximately \$1 billion for Central America and the Caribbean, bringing to \$1.2 billion U.S. government relief expenditures following hurricanes last year in that region. Some of the new funds will be used to replenish emergency programs that provided immediate relief after the hurricanes.

After signing the measure, President Clinton issued a statement saying it would "provide urgently needed resources to help Central Americans repair and rebuild after the devastation of Hurricane Mitch. With these funds, farmers can plant new crops in the final weeks of the growing season; roads, hospitals and schools can be rebuilt; and Central Americans can look to the future with hope, knowing that America is standing with them."

New Central American relief spending includes:

- \$136 million for public-health programs to reconstruct 783 clinics, to provide water and sanitation services for nearly 4 million and disease control, surveillance and prevention for 17.5 million people;

- \$283 million to restart economies by constructing or repairing 720 kilometers of rural roads, providing loans for seeds, tools and fertilizer and helping 65,000 hilltop farmers adopt sustainable production methods;

- \$55 million for emergency shelter for 20,000 people and to repair and re-equip 1,700 schools;

- \$64 million for technical assistance for environmental management and disaster mitigation; and

- \$41 million for debt relief.

The U.S. Agency for International Development will head reconstruction efforts on behalf of the United States, said Harriet Babbitt, deputy administrator of the agency.

Peter Romero, Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs, told reporters the "disaster was unprecedented in Central American history and I think you can easily characterize the response by the U.S. government and hopefully by the global community as unprecedented. We'll know the second part of that after Stockholm."

Most of the U.S. assistance will be channeled through nongovernmental organizations working in cooperation with U.S. agencies such as USAID.

In addition to funds appropriated by Congress, private donations to nongovernmental relief organizations in the wake of the Kosovo crisis and the hurricanes in Central America appear to be up dramatically, said a USAID spokesperson.

While USAID keeps no overall tally of private gifts to relief operations, the spokesperson said that based on anecdotal evidence, public response to the Kosovo refugee crisis and the hurricane destruction in Central America was overwhelming.

Clinton welcomed most aspects of the legislation but chided lawmakers for attaching what he called "unnecessary and ill-advised special projects onto essential emergency legislation."

He said some provisions reward special interests, weaken environmental protections and undermine efforts to stop teen smoking.

"Were it not for pressing needs in Kosovo, Central America, the Middle East, and America's heartland, I would have rejected several of these measures," he said.

Clinton said he is "extremely disappointed that the Congress failed to require states to use even a portion of the funds collected from tobacco companies to prevent youth smoking."

-30-

**END**

---