

# Kukes, Albania

a photo essay









# Kukes, Albania

## Dispatches

A Cyber-Conversation Between Two Recent College Grads  
By Alita Byrd and Mitch Scoggins

On Tuesday afternoon, April 20, 1999 just as the first reports of the terrible killing spree in a Colorado high school were being broadcast across the United States, Mitch Scoggins boarded a plane at Washington Dulles International Airport, bound for another tragedy—one that had covered the front pages of newspapers around the world for more than four weeks.

In the unstable Balkans, dominant Serbs clashed with an ethnic Albanian minority in the disputed province of Kosovo. Kosovars were being driven from their homes into neighboring Albania and Macedonia. The Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) was there on the front lines, working in the camps to help provide for the most basic needs of thousands of refugees who streamed across the border. They needed experienced, tireless workers like Mitch to help make a difference—one family at a time.

While Mitch was fortunate enough to head off into the thick of the relief effort, I continued commuting to my nine-to-five job at *National Geographic* magazine, contenting myself with newspaper stories, conversations with Priit Vesilind, a senior writer for *National Geographic* who returned from Albania just as Mitch left for the camps, and e-mails from Mitch.

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24 April 1999

**Hello Everybody,**

The ferry for Durres, Albania landed around noon on Thursday. Fortunately, there was a guy from ADRA there to meet a truck that was coming off the boat so I was able to catch a ride to the ADRA Albania office in Tirane.

I discovered that I was assigned to the camps in Kukes (pronounced "cook-us"), and left for here this morning at 6 am. It was an eight to 10 hour drive that we made in six. My driver was, I think, a direct male-line descendent of Jehu. Most of the roads in Albania are really bad. The rest of them are worse. Dirt roads are bad, but roads that used to be paved are pure hell. I am so shook up I don't think I have stopped rattling yet.

It turns out that I am going to be running a food distribution team which will be supplying food to several thousand refugees in five to six camps in the area. I've got two trucks and seven guys working for me. I will be trained tomorrow and off on my own by Sunday.

We send out mail once a day and get it back at the same time. I will try to respond to e-mails, but it all goes through two computers with people trying to use them for business and personal letters, so I only get it for a few minutes at a time.

**Mitch**

25 April 1999

**Dear Alita,**

I've been here for one day now and am still standing around looking stupid. I think it will take me about a week to really get up to speed with the whole project.

By the way, thanks so much for the suggestion of buying hiking socks before leaving home. They have made a world of difference.

It's raining. Again. Other than during the incredibly bumpy ride up here, I have not yet regretted my decision to come. The countryside is gorgeous and the people are nice.

Once I get a handle on what I'm supposed to be doing, I'm going to be in heaven. I get so excited when I am watching the news at home and see a war or disaster and think perhaps I will get a chance to be there soon. I feel badly that I feel this way about others' misfortune. But this is what I was meant to do, I think.

I have completed my first day of food distribution in the camps, and will be headed out for my second here in a few minutes. Today we are going to distribute oil (in five liter bottles) and HDRs (Humanitarian Daily Rations) to one big camp just outside of town. There are about 5,000 people in this one, but we distribute by family so we'll hand out about 1,000 rations. We'll then take the trucks back to the World Food Programme warehouse to reload for the next day, and then head out to try to register all the new people who have come in over the last few days.

The Serbs still have the border closed so the flow of refugees into town has all but stopped. It's great for us, but I still wish they were coming through. At the border they are not being treated well. The Serbs are killing most of the men, and are stealing everything from the families. I was talking to a man last night whose wife was not able to remove her wedding ring to give to the soldiers. They cut her finger off to take it.

Yesterday afternoon we had a medical team arrive with a mobile surgical unit. They are planning to set up and try to get some medical help to the refugees as they come across. I took them through a camp last night and they said about a third of the people need medical attention. There's impetigo, infections, and the normal flus and fevers. Luckily we have avoided meningitis and typhoid outbreaks, but as the weather warms we are going to be facing that too.

The weather is not too bad, the rain is starting to clear up. Come next month it is supposed to be really nice for a while. I just can't get over how beautiful the countryside is. There are two huge mountains to the north of us, with snow-capped peaks and all.

So far the security here has been pretty good. Occa-



sionally at night we can hear the bombing across the border, but it is quite far away. There are occasional AK-47 shots around here, but we are told that it is just the police arguing with small bandit group who make forays across the border. It sure is better than some places I've been. Mogadishu, for one.

Kukes is a town of 20,000 people that has 120,000 refugees in it, so you can imagine what sanitation is like.

We've got 16 aid workers in a two-bedroom, one-bath house so that makes it a bit interesting. In a couple days we will be down to ten people so it will be a bit better.

I must get in line for the bathroom before I head out for the day.

**Mitch**

25 April 1999

**Dear Mitch,**

So glad you got hiking socks. I may be younger than you, but I know a few things. It sounds like you are doing a great work in the midst of some very horrible things. How can human beings do these things to other human beings?

I've been reading about the HDRs in the paper. The *Baltimore Sun* said the food is all politically correct, with no pork, fancy names or entrees, no culturally confusing packaging, and can withstand being dropped from planes.

You are ever-present in our thoughts. You are doing something so noble, and it's wonderful that incidentally it happens to make you very happy. Too bad more people aren't willing to jump in and get their hands dirty. The politicians and diplomats who are trying to resolve this crisis may be able to affect more people (or not) but when you hand someone a loaf of bread, you are helping on such a fundamental level. Talk about job satisfaction!

**Alita**

26 April 1999

**Hey Alita,**

I'm getting the hang of the whole food distribution thing. I took the whole process through today from loading to distributing to loading again, and I think it was successful. I had a lot of help from the more experienced people, but I'll be off on my own tomorrow.

Please keep those letters coming—it's a big lift to hear from you. I'm working 17 hours a day in a stressful job and living in a stressful house and might go crazy without your touches of sanity.

**Mitch**

27 April 1999

**Dear Mitch,**

Does it seem you have been there forever or not long at all? Time can be so relative.

I spoke to a writer at *National Geographic* today, Priit Vesilind, whose office is right down the hall from mine. He is from the Balkans, and just returned from a trip to Albania. I think he even went to Kukes. He will be doing a story on Albania for *National Geographic* next spring. I told him about you and he thinks you are very brave.

Priit said he heard about the shootings in Columbine

on one of the final days of his trip, and it shocked him terribly. His youngest kid is in college. And then suddenly he realized that in Kosovo, for the last three or four weeks, there had been the equivalent of a Columbine shooting every day. Families were being torn apart. The human tragedy of it really hit him them.

Also, I spoke to Bonnie Dwyer, editor of *Spectrum* and she thinks we should compile and print the e-mails between us. She says it would be an interesting way to follow the story. So let me know what you think.

Everyone says hello and lots of friends here want to come help out. Any openings? I went to hear a world-famous rock climber speak at the National Geographic tonight who climbed a 5,000-foot straight up granite wall in the Arctic. He was on the wall for a month. And you thought you lived in cramped quarters!

**Alita**

28 April 1999

**Hey all,**

It feels like I've been here for weeks, even though it hasn't been even a week yet. I'm really getting into the work though and am even enjoying myself.

I would certainly be willing to let you use my emails in any way for *Spectrum*. That sounds excellent!

It's a beautiful day in Kukes. No rain (here's me knocking on wood), about 70 degrees, with a slight breeze. Finished work early today, due to the lack of refugees. The government is moving them out in droves, headed for the southern parts of the country. We're using the extra time to gear up for the next influx that is expected any day now. We've heard estimates of anywhere from 50,000 to 200,000. We are also expecting a bit of a war here. Three bombs went off in town yesterday and two so far today—it's only 1:30 pm though and I have high hopes for the rest of the day.

It's strange that there is no "grapevine" here the way there is in Africa. I couldn't find out if the bombs were training exercises (we have a KLA camp in the middle of town—makes us a nice target for the Serbs), or if they were Serb bombs. In Africa I could have asked anyone on the street and they could have told me, but here I can't even get an answer out of the police. They say they don't know, and for some reason, I believed them.

Last night about 9:30 pm I was in a cafe about 2 meters up the road from our house/office after a particularly grueling session of meetings, when a couple of our workers came in and asked me to leave with them. I was listening to my Walkman, and reading a delightful little book (that was a gift from you, as a matter of fact). I was a bit confused, but I went with them (they spoke no English). They delivered me to the office and then left. I was really confused. Considering the evening wasted, I yakked for a while with the boss (Paul McKee) and went to bed. I hear this morning that some people outside the cafe had taken a liking to the Walkman and were planning a mugging when I left. I spend a lot of time in that cafe and the owner didn't care to lose a good customer, so he asked some people to fetch me. Anyway, I have been asked not to walk around town after dark anymore.



I probably won't . . . much.

There is an odd mix of brutality and kindness here. It is nigh impossible for me to buy a Coke, coffee, or anything else for myself. Every person I know (and I am meeting more every day), considers it a mission to pay for whatever I'm having. They might be just walking by the cafe, but they'll stop in, pay my bill, say "hi" and leave. It gets frustrating after a while since I make many times more money than they do and they know it.

On the flip side, a Catholic Relief Services worker from the States decided to walk one of his female employees home after work last week and her brothers broke the bones in his hand. Like I said, it's an odd mix.

With the dwindling number of refugees in the city camps, we have been asked by UNHCR (United Nations High Commission for Refugees) and CARE (Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere) to take over the management of one (or maybe two) really big camps outside of town. We have not yet decided what we are going to do. I spent the last couple of hours putting together a projected budget that we will present to UNHCR. If we get the money we'll probably do it.

No more bombs this afternoon, but there was some AK-47 fire (15-20 rounds) somewhere near the town square this evening while Paul and I were having a working dinner. We were at the Bar American and the patrons, largely foreigners, turned their heads a bit but didn't pause their conversation much. They've heard it before, I guess. I ran into a couple of Goal Ireland workers, one of whom I thought I recognized. I asked her if we'd met before.

"Somalia?" she asked.

"I was there."

"Rwanda?"

"Yes."

"Goma?"

"There too."

We had a bit of a laugh. She's about 50 and says she travels all over the planet and meets the same people most every place.

Just found out that two more of my friends are coming into town. Fred Kumah, who I worked under in Somalia, arrived today. Paul Crawford, an Australian I worked with in Rwanda, is arriving early next week.

Going in to our nightly staff meeting now.

**Mitch**

29 April 1999

**Dear Mitch,**

I talked to Priit (the *National Geographic* writer) for awhile today about the Albania situation. He said the most striking thing he noticed while there was people's resilience—how children could run and play and laugh and adults could smile and be so personable in the face of such tremendous tragedy.

I wanted to pass on part of one of Priit's dispatches he wrote while there. I'm sure you'll find it interesting since he wrote about Kukes.

"Tirana, the Albanian capital, is only a few hundred miles south of Kukes, but the trip through twisted,

pockmarked roads takes as long as eight hours. On this road we drove head-on into caravans of these tractors pulling their carts of misery. Families who had lost everything now huddled under plastic sheeting that flapped in the wind and covered the carts like little greenhouses. Underneath were blankets, pans, suitcases, grandmothers, sick babies, and faces totally numb with exhaustion.

"I asked one man from the village of Poters what happened. 'The Serbs came, and they killed eleven of our people. Murdered them. And why? They wanted to strike fear into the rest of us. Go to NATO, they shouted, Go to Clinton. this is Serbian territory.

"Here in Kukes—only a block away from where a boisterous army of journalists, relief workers, and uniformed soldiers of the Kosovo Liberation Army are drinking Heinekens and eating steak and fries—there is a large field where tractors have come with their plastic-covered wagons. Hundreds are lined up here on the road, looking for all the world like some bizarre and wretched flea market, but it is a place of incongruous beauty.

"The squalid camp rests on a green hillside, a field that slopes down to a vast sparkling reservoir. I can see farms with plum trees in white blossom, and brilliant yellow forsythia covers the near hillside. Behind towers the dark mountain with its snows melting in the clouds. Silhouetted against a dark mountain are a small cream-colored mosque and minaret, a charmingly simple reminder that Albanians are mostly Muslim while Serbs are Orthodox Christians. Even at the turn of the millennium how you worship God can still compel men to murder."

Thanks so much for all the news updates. Stay clear of the bombs, okay?

**Alita**

1 May 1999

**Hi all,**

Well, the good news is that the Serbs opened the border. The bad news is that the Serbs opened the border.

To our count, 11,489 people came across in 12 hours yesterday, from 10 am to 10 pm. The Serbs—lovely people that they are—decided to clear out the town of Prizren. We hear that there were 120,000 ethnic Albanians there. Those who were not shot are headed here and for other borders. With the lack of information, rumors are running rampant. We have estimates of anywhere from 50,000-100,000 people headed our way.

I went out to the border at 1:30 pm yesterday. ADRA had stations set up and we were distributing water, blankets and food. Other organizations were handing out milk, hot tea and, of course, medical attention. At the border the Serbs were removing all the license plates and papers from the cars (in addition to taking all personal papers from the people and robbing them blind). They told them "We take your plates, but your brothers in Albania will take your cars." Not really knowing what to expect when they arrived, they were rather surprised to be descended upon by a swarm of locals and foreigners stuffing things into their windows.

The refugees who made it through last night were in



pretty good shape. They had only been traveling for one day and had not had to spend the night anywhere. They were mostly thirsty. Those who arrive today have had to spend the night in Kosovo where the UNHCR people said they will be "badly punished." They are thirsty, hungry and scared. Those who arrive tomorrow will be thirsty, hungry, scared, and sick. I don't want to know what those arriving after that will be like.

The Serbs closed their side of the border last night at 10 pm. It took until 11:15 pm to process all those refugees that were strung through no-man's land. We arrived home around midnight. We expected to go back this morning, but Catholic Relief Services organized a big effort there, which allows us to continue distribution in our camps here in town which have swelled because of the influx.

There is an effort by NATO and the UN to keep this batch of refugees moving south. About 40 NATO trucks arrived yesterday and loaded thousands for the move south. I think this is best; one more day of travel and they can settle in a place where they can stay for a while. If they stopped here it would be very hard to ask them to move again.

I spent the morning distributing HDRs and collapsible water bladders in one of the bigger camps. Fortunately, it has stopped raining, but now it is incredibly dusty and beginning to get quite hot. They say it gets—and stays—(around 40 degrees Celsius, 104 degrees Fahrenheit) for the next three months. That means disease vectors are about to go through the roof.

This afternoon I loaded four tons of pasta onto a truck, and unloaded 17 tons of clothes off a truck—with help, of course. I am exhausted.

**Mitch**

*5 May 1999*

**Mitch,**

I don't think I can even begin to imagine what it's like there. Though it's closer to our experience than something like the Rwanda tragedy, and we can relate better, I still can't grasp the magnitude of what is happening where you are.

Priit says that Albania now contains more than 300,000 homeless people, ten percent of the normal Albanian population. He said to try to imagine 26 million refugees—ten percent of the United States—arriving destitute at a remote mountain pass in Montana. I can't.

**Alita**

*7 May 1999*

**Hello again all,**

ADRA has accepted responsibilities for distribution in eight new collective centers, in addition to the new camp we are feeding. The flow of refugees has slowed to only a few hundred per day. ADRA has finally brought in enough translators and vehicles (as of today) so I can actually do my job. We're getting more hand-held radios on Saturday and then everything will be perfect. Lots better, anyway. Still too many people in this house, but it's quite impossible to find housing in this town, so

we're stuck for now.

Some new personnel will be coming in the next few days, and that will take some of the load off us here. Never enough sleep. Last night was a bit of a mess. One of our workers here—a British girl—couldn't take the stress and flipped out. Around midnight I was awakened by screaming and ranting. Several of the guys got up to help so I tried to go back to sleep. When things didn't stop for an hour and a half I got up too. The MSF (Medecins Sans Frontiers) Germany doctors were here and they gave the girl more sedatives that I thought one person could hold. They gave her five injections, three doses of Diazepam (Valium), and two of some other one. They finally got her calmed down—about 2:30 am—and we shipped her off to Tirane today. She wasn't well this morning either. We hoped the sleep would help, but she was edgy all morning and cracked a couple of times. She had been here about five days longer than the rest of us, so we'll see how things go for us over the next few days!

I went next door to a pharmacy this morning and bought a bottle of Valium (pill variety) and gave them to a girl who was watching the poor British girl until she got on the chopper, with instructions to feed them to her in case of emergency. Over the course of the morning someone nicked the whole bottle. I'm not sure they knew what they were snitching, which I think is rather amusing. I'm expecting to find a comatose worker lying on our floor one of these days.

We've adjusted the work load so that we are no longer in charge of various distribution areas. Instead I am doing all the warehousing and distribution planning, and my cohort, Klaus, is overseeing the actual distribution. That leaves some of the other personnel free to run the camp. It's a much more effective system, with several hours of intensive work preceded or followed by several slow hours. It's nice to be able to relax a bit.

Security is getting worse by the day. I hear more gunfire each night, and some during the day. The bombs have stopped though, so that's a plus. The UN has set up a good evacuation plan for the expat personnel. Gunther (operations manager) and I, being the less shakable types, are the security wardens for ADRA here. We get to coordinate the evacuation and lead the convoy out if necessary. I was the warden for all of North Mogadishu while there, so this is a lot simpler (and less likely to be used).

**Mitch**

*12 May 1999*

**Hello all,**

Things have been hectic here with another 20,000 people coming across the border in the last four days. Our camps have swelled and we can't keep up with the registration process which makes food distribution remarkably difficult.

On the very bright side, we have located a new living facility (read "house") and will be moving in tomorrow night. We're keeping this place as an office and three or four people will stay here, but eight of us are moving into the new place, with two people to a room, instead of seven or eight. It has four bedrooms and two baths, like



real humans have. We are renting it from the Kukes chief of police, so security shouldn't be much of a problem. Having this house will go yards towards relieving the stress. A stressful job is okay when you have a non-stressful environment to return to.

**Mitch**

23 May 1999

**Mitch,**

I was reading a review of the new Star Wars movie today in the *New Yorker*. I must admit, I did go see it last week at the Uptown Theater, in the midst of a very excitable crowd, some of whom stood in line from noon until the 10 pm showing—not to buy tickets, but just to get seats, in a theater that is commonly said to have no bad seats. And the showing was not oversold. Makes me think that our lives must be empty, to get so excited about something so trivial. That said, it was a good movie. Just way overrated. Anyway, as I was saying, in a crushing review, the *New Yorker* had this to say, relating the Kosovo crisis and Star Wars: "One should not underestimate the effect, at once extravagant and insidious, of popular entertainment on the political imagination. It is only since Star Wars, after all, a work that displays the casual annihilation of planets but not a single drop of blood, that America has discovered its alarming and wholly impractical taste for the deathless war—a war in which, if we must have dying, it should always happen to the other side."

Another interesting thing I was reading in *New Yorker* examined the average American's reaction to this war, by examining the music played on CNN's reports on Kosovo. According to a composer who has written scores for NBC, CNBC and MSNBC: "The Iraq music was classic war music. It was 'Hunt for Red October'; it was 'Patton' and 'Victory at Sea.' It was very much 'Let's go kick Saddam Hussein's ass.' The Albanian music is ambivalent. It can't make up its mind. It says that there's something bad here, but we don't know what it is." It is incredible what a subconscious difference music can make. Ever try to watch a horror flick while listening to Mozart? The music is in integral part of manipulating an audience. So basically, we don't feel as strongly for the Kosovo war as for the Iraqi conflict because of CNN's choice of music? Perhaps.

I've just been looking through Priit's photos of camps he shot while he was on assignment. I particularly looked at the photos of the camps in Kukes. The mountains seem to overshadow everything. It is really beautiful there. The people's faces are so weatherworn and dark. I guess some of them have been living outside for quite some time. And I couldn't believe all the tractors! Priit said the farmers just had to hop on their tractors and drive right out of Kosovo, making use of the transportation available to them.

**Alita**

24 May 1999

**Hey all,**

Been a while since I've sent news about the projects

here. I guess mostly it's been maintaining the status quo, not a lot of new stuff. Over the last two days though we've gotten a new type of refugee.

It seems a few thousand ethnic-Albanian men have been in prison in Kosovo. I think the charges were being members of the KLA or something along those lines. About 1,500 of these men have come across the border yesterday and today. There are many cases of moderate to severe malnourishment, and some physical and psychological trauma. Many of the men have been beaten with varying degrees of severity, and quite a few have had their hands broken. This is so they can't fight, they're told.

Every day it's looking more and more like there is going to be a ground war, and the UN is really pushing to get people out of town. The refugee population that ADRA is feeding has dropped from 42,000 to 32,000. They are being moved to larger camps in the southern parts of the country where the level of service and the infrastructure is much better. That's all well and good, but it will only take three or four days to put our numbers back up to where they were.

The big news from my end I guess, is that Paul, Director of Northern Albanian Projects, and Gunther, operations manager, have both bailed and headed for the southern projects. In a fit of dementia (or some other equally debilitating mental condition), some fool named me boss of this nine-ring circus. My official title is Director of Northern Albania Programs. Verbose way of saying that I get to go to all the meetings and deal with personnel issues. Lucky me. Now I need to fill out my staff. Do you want a job? I know it's not even fair to ask with the wonderful opportunity you have at *National Geographic*, but I thought I'd ask.

This is the end of my first day in this role and no one's dead who's not supposed to be, so I guess it's okay. But as Scarlett says, "Tomorrow is another day."

**Mitch**

4 June 1999

**Mitch,**

"MILOSEVIC YIELDS ON NATO'S KEY TERMS" and "Million Refugees Can Return" proclaims the *New York Times* in banner headlines.

I know there are an awful lot of people for you to help put back, but does this mean you're coming home? Who knows what tomorrow will bring?

**Alita**

This e-mail conversation between Scoggins and Byrd is published verbatim.

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