

Introduction

The Albanian word for the country is 'Shqiperia', meaning 'The Land of the Eagles'. Surrounded by rugged mountainous crags, Albania is the dwelling place of crystal clear lakes, beautiful coastlines and ancient historical sights.



History

Albanians received their distinctive culture and language from the Illyrians, who inhabited the Balkans early in the first millennium BC. The 14th and 15th centuries saw the Ottoman Empire overpower the Balkan Peninsula, splitting Albania along religious, regional and tribal lines. During the 1800s and early 1900s, fear that the Ottoman Empire would lose its populated lands to the emerging Balkan states triggered an upsurge of nationalism, which led to the establishment of an independent Albania.

After World War II the Marxist 'Worker's Party' ruled the country and progressively sought to isolate Albania culturally and economically. Under the dictator Enver Hoxha, the ethical and moral basis of Albanian society was severely weakened. A ban was placed on religious worship. In 1991 the communist dictatorship ended and the 1992 elections saw the end of 47 years of communist rule. However, the transition from communism to democracy hasn't been easy. The 1990s saw a rapid turnover of presidents and prime ministers.

In 1997, the country descended into anarchy and the government was destabilised. Despite the government's efforts to bring normality back to the country, Albania's economic problems remain immense. Unemployment is high, the infrastructure weak, and bribery and nepotism are widespread. The ongoing corruption is a major deterrent of foreign investment. The continuing ethnic tensions in surrounding countries have also placed much strain on the government and the people. However, the government has succeeded in bringing inflation under control and the economy is growing.

Current challenges

- ▶ Albania is one of the poorest countries in Europe. It is estimated that about a quarter of the three and a half million people in Albania live in poverty and five per cent in extreme poverty, unable to meet their basic food requirements. Unemployment is a major factor contributing to the economic hardship.
- ▶ Albania has a reputation for being a base for organised crime and human trafficking. Trafficking of children of prostitution, paedophilia rings, corruption, mafia influence and smuggling are a few of the many challenges faced by the government.
- ▶ Environmental issues, including extreme pollution, remain a huge challenge. Tirana, the capital of Albania, remains one of the most polluted cities in Europe.

BMS involvement in Albania

BMS World Mission personnel have been working in Albania since 1992. In 1999 all BMS workers in the country became involved in relief work as Kosovan refugees poured into Albania. A BMS Emergency Response team of volunteers was also sent out. The Baptist Union of Albania was formed in 1999 and BMS works closely with them. Some of the projects with which BMS is involved are as follows:

Gjerasim Dhimiter Qiriazhi (GDQ) School in Tirana

Roger Pearce, BMS worker in Albania, is the director of this multinational school for mission workers' children. BMS workers Susan Lodge and Jane Waites also teach at the school, and Roger's wife, Nicola, does voluntary work there.

'Drita e botes' (Light of the World) Baptist Church

BMS personnel Graham and Mairi McBain are pastoring a church in Shkozë, Tirana. Tim and Helen Brook teach English and IT at the church, which also functions as a community centre.

Church planting in Vloora

BMS worker Graham Sansom pastors a church in the southern port town of Vloora.

Background information

The land

Albania is roughly the size of Wales and is hemmed in by high mountains. Much of the coastal plain has been recovered from the sea this century and this area and the surrounding hills are fertile, producing some of the country's food requirements, although much has to be imported. Forests and swamps cover more than one-third of the country's land. However, the forests are being extensively logged, creating uncontrollable soil erosion.

Religion

Christianity was first introduced to Albania during the Roman era. Albania's geographical position meant that it lay in the tension zone between the Western and Eastern Churches. Albania's Catholic north and Orthodox South reflects this history. Under the Turks many Albanians accepted Islam in order to keep their land and property.

During Communist rule no religion was allowed to exist and in 1967 Albania became the first and only official atheist country. Demonstrations of faith were severely punished. Believers' courageous resistance against communist pressure resulted in many executions. The ban on worship was lifted in 1990; however, the legal provision for religious freedom was only made in 1998.

Since 1991 the number of Protestant missions has grown rapidly. By 1995 it was thought that Albania was the most heavily 'missioned' country in Europe; a situation the Orthodox and Catholic leadership do not find easy to accept. The Baptist Union of Albania was formed in 1999 with four churches in membership. Today there are eight churches in the Union and also approximately nine independent Baptist churches. The training of pastors, evangelists and church leaders is the current priority.

Prayer points

- ▶ Pray for the Baptist Union of Albania, that they will communicate the message of Christ in an effective and transforming way, reaching the many needs of the Albanian Church.
- ▶ Pray for Albania's government and leadership. Over 700,000 Albanians lost their lives or were imprisoned under communism. Pray for lasting peace and for the country's leaders to lead with integrity and wisdom.
- ▶ Pray for economic reforms to take place. Most

Albanians rely on money from Albanians abroad to survive. Pray especially for employment opportunities to open up and for the nation to have a more stable economic footing.

FURTHER INFORMATION

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