

U.S.-Albanian Relations and Albania's Progress Toward EU and NATO

**May 7, 2007
Washington, DC**

Address by H.E. Mr. Lulzim Basha, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Albania

Honorable Director Bugajski,

Distinguished participants, friends of Albania and Albanians,

On my first visit to the United States, in the capacity as a the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Albania, I am indeed very happy to speak in front of such a distinguished auditorium on the relations of Albania with the United States and my country's endeavors for Euro-Atlantic integration.

Permit me first, to bring to your attention honorable Ladies and Gentlemen, that this year we commemorate the 85th Anniversary of the recognition of the Albanian state by the United States.

Relations between our two countries date back to the beginning of this century, from the time of President Woodrow Wilson, to whom Albania owes not a small debt, but perhaps its whole existence. This significant gesture was never forgotten by thousands of Americans of Albanian origin, who have maintained contact with their native country during all these years.

U.S-Albanian relations have had their ups and downs, with the most unfortunate period during the post-World War II era, when relations broke down and Albania fell under the communist yoke for half a century. After a long interruption of 52 years, a notable event of emerging democracy in Albania was also the opening of the US embassy in Tirana, on 1 October 1991, with Mr. Christopher Hill, as the Charge d'Affaires ad interim, followed by the US Ambassador, Will Edwin Ryerson.

The former US State Secretary, Mr. James A. Baker II was the first high official from US to visit Albania, after the long period of isolation.

Since then, relations US-Albania have advanced and consolidated. The US has continuously supported and encouraged the process of political and economic reforms, the strengthening of the rule of law and market economy in Albania.

While commending the brilliant political relations with US, our two countries are working to ensure that economic relations are also brought to the same heights. In this

regard, one of the priorities of the Albanian government is the attraction of foreign investments. Albania is looking forward to having an American investment presence in the country. For the attainment of this objective, the improvement of the business climate and legislation at home, the Albanian government has launched a series of legal initiatives called "Albania 1 Euro," including the reduction of business taxes and the simplification of business start-up procedures.

Today we notice with pleasure the large US companies such as Lockheed Martin, Bechtel, and EximBank present in Albania, either with their investments or through their participation in projects with other partners as in the case with ASG Power and Airport Partners. Albania is involved in the program "Countries on the Threshold," benefiting in this way from the assistance of the Millennium Corporation, aimed at fighting against corruption in three major economic fields: public procurement, tax administration, and business management.

Albania has become an important US partner in the Balkans. The partnership between our two countries in the field of security reached its climax during the Kosova crisis and strengthened further after the events of 11 September 2001, when Albania lined itself up with the first countries offering full cooperation to the US. Today, Albania is not regarded as a consumer, but a contributor to security in the region and beyond. Our troops serve with dignity on the side of US and European troops in the fight against terrorism. Albania contributes with a contingent of 120 commando troops in Iraq, 24 in NATO-led ISAF operation in Afghanistan and with a presence of 70 troops in the EU-led ALTHEA operation in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

On 10th June, President George W. Bush will make a visit to Albania. We consider the selection of Albania among the Adriatic 3 countries as symbolically important; the US sees Albania as a strategic ally in the region. This visit comes at a crucial moment, not only for democratic developments in Albania but also for Kosova and the entire region. It is considered as the culminating event in relations between our two countries, an acknowledgement of the gratefulness of the Albanian nation for the irreplaceable role that the US has played since the recognition of the Albanian state until the present day. We also view this visit as a strong motivation to maintain the course of reforms, as an expression of gratitude for our country's contribution in the struggle against terrorism, as support in our efforts for NATO integration, and as the confirmation of the irreplaceable US role in solving Kosova's status.

Let me highlight the fact that it was during the Bush administration that Kosova prepared for its independence, whereas Albania prepared for NATO membership.

Let me talk in more concrete terms concerning the endeavors of Albania for its integration into the Euro-Atlantic structures.

The Albanian government regards its integration into the EU and NATO as its two major objectives, whose fulfillment requires maximum efforts and contribution from each actor and factor at home. Likewise, we think that Albania has something to offer these

organizations: including more stability and democracy in the Balkans and the concrete example of a country striving with all its force to fight crime and corruption.

Euro-Atlantic integration remains the strategic objective of the government of Albania. It is one of the main pillars of Albanian foreign policy and a powerful drive in the overall process of reform. This major objective is fully compatible with our national interests; moreover it serves our common goal of strengthening stability and fostering security in our region and beyond. The Albanian participation in the common fight against terrorism is another example of the above-mentioned dimension and the already-approved participation of my country in the Alliance operation “Active Endeavor” represents again the materialization of the above-mentioned philosophy.

At the same time we are devoting particular efforts to EU integration, since we have entered a new phase of institutional relationship after the signature of the SAA (Stabilization and Association Agreement) and the process of its ratification.

We also highly appreciate the active cooperation we have developed under the auspices of the US-Adriatic Charter initiative with the other two MAP countries, Croatia and Macedonia. This cooperation not only serves a common regional approach toward membership in the Alliance but it has been widened in a number of fields: political, economic, military, security, and environmental, because we share the same objectives for NATO and EU integration, and thus for a common future.

In this respect we intend to further intensify and widen the successful pattern of regional cooperation with the three new PfP countries, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Serbia.

Let me express the belief that thanks to the implementation of reforms launched in the field of defense and on a wider scale, to the support from the US and other NATO countries, Albania will meet its goal of receiving an invitation to the NATO Summit in 2008.

Last but not least, Albania supports the report and proposal of President Ahtisaari for the settlement of Kosova’s status. It considers this as an important political decision, not only for Kosova’s future, but for the future of the entire region.

The Ahtisaari proposal, considered as a document of compromise in facing the new realities in the Balkans, marks the beginning of the final stage in the engagement of the International Community for a genuine and lasting settlement over Kosova. It will put an end to the existing non-functioning Status Quo.

With this proposal, Serbia “De Jure” definitively loses the right of sovereignty over Kosova. The report and proposal of Martti Ahtisaari responds to the aspirations of Kosova’s people: a free, independent, democratic, fully functional and multiethnic country, a new state, with its own symbols and institutions, with the right of membership

in international organizations including the UN, whereby the rights and freedoms of minorities are observed and safeguarded, both through laws and institutions.

We believe that the status settlement will be politically and legally clear. It would guarantee not only the territorial integrity of Kosova, but also the functional integrity of its institutions at all levels, and it would offer its vision for the future development of an independent Kosova.

Albania welcomes the stance of the US, the EU and President Ahtisaari that the solution for Kosova relies on its particularities, the situation on the ground, and that its case does not represent a precedent.

The Republic of Albania believes that Ahtisaari's proposal will receive the consensus of the UN Security Council member states which would bring about their approval and the adoption of the relevant resolution, paving the way for Kosova's independence.

Albania welcomes the stance of the UN Secretary General, the EU, the US and the rest of the international community in support of President Ahtisaari's proposal for a lasting, clear and rapid solution of Kosova's status, designed to establish a multi-ethnic environment and conducive to sustainable regional development.

In this regard, we think that any further amendments or postponements do not serve the peace and stability, neither in Kosova nor in the region. We share the same concern that keeping the momentum in the status process constitutes a key factor in eliminating the sentiments of fear and ambiguity. The postponement of the status process could produce unpredictable risks, with high political and economic costs for Kosova and the region.

Being aware that without resolving Kosova's status, there could be no talk of a calm and stable Balkans, Albania has stated more than once that it is in favor of observing the existing borders, including those with neighboring Kosova.

We seize this opportunity to express our deepest belief that UNMIK will successfully crown its mission, including the difficult period of transition, in the course of shifting powers to the local institutions and to the International Civil Office.

While confirming our support for the incoming International Mission in Kosova, led by the Civil International Representative (ICR), who will also be the EU Special Representative, we share the view that the mandate, competencies, and the role of the international presence should be clearly defined and avoid any overlapping of institutions.

Sharing a concern for the very sensitive socio-economic problems in Kosova, including the high unemployment rate and widespread poverty, it is clear that Kosova needs a substantial package of economic assistance. In this regard we appreciate and support the idea expressed in the EU-US Summit held in Washington on April 30, 2007, to convene a Donor's Conference aiming to assist post-status developments in Kosova.

We express our deepest belief that with broad political and economic support from the international community, Kosova's leadership will succeed in meeting the coming challenges: concluding the status process and the structuring of the future Kosova state, in keeping with democratic and contemporary standards; devising a new Constitution, adopting state symbols, drafting new legislation, including the one on elections, ensuring equal respect and protection of the rights and freedoms for all citizens; building a state of the rule of law and promoting the country's socio-economic development.

We reiterate our own commitment to Kosova, so that the country can do its best in respecting the rights of all communities. Multi-ethnicity is part and parcel of democracy. Kosova belongs to all, not only to the majority Albanians, but also to the other minority communities.

At the same time, we seize the opportunity to appeal to the minority communities, particularly the Serbs of Kosova, to involve themselves in this crucial and irreversible process, because this is the best service they could do for themselves, for democracy and for multi-ethnicity. We believe that the Belgrade authorities should also share this international appeal for the benefit of building a favorable climate for the full integration of the Serbian community in Kosova's society and institutions.

The Ahtisaari Proposal gives evidence of progress in Kosova, in its path of fulfilling the aspirations of its own people for an independent state. This aspiration is on the point of being accomplished. While avoiding any signs of exhaustion, haste, and nervousness, Kosova should conclude the process in an institutional way, through political and diplomatic means. Resorting to any violence would serve the interests of those who oppose independence. Kosova should lose neither its achievements nor its prospects. The historical momentum requires unity, wisdom, responsibility, and self-restraint, proving this way that Kosova deserves its independence.