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BRUSSELS FOR USEC

E.O. 12356: N/A
TAGS: PREL, AL
SUBJECT: U.S. MISSION TO ALBANIA - FIRST IMPRESSIONS

1. SUMMARY: THE ALBANIAN GOVERNMENT AND PEOPLE HAVE
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ENTHUSIASTICALLY WELCOMED THE FIRST U.S. DIPLOMATIC
MISSION TO ALBANIA IN 50 YEARS. MISSION LEADER DAVID
SWARTZ REPORTED THAT THE MFA HAS PROVIDED FACILITATIVE
ASSISTANCE ON TELEPHONE AND FAX CAPABILITY, HOTEL ROOMS,
TRANSPORTATION, AND FULL ACCESS T(ALL CONTACTS SOUGHT BY
OUR DIPLOMATS. DEMONSTRATING U.S. SUPPORT FOR THE
DEMOCRATIZATION PROCESS, SWARTZ OBSERVED A DEMOCRATIC
PARTY RALLY IN ELBASAN AND HAS BEGUN A ROUND OF MEETINGS
WITH OPPOSITION PARTY LEADERS. CITIZENS IN TIRANA AND
ELBASAN HAVE ENGAGED MISSION MEMBERS IN STREET
CONVERSATIONS IN WHICH THEY HAVE PRAISED PRESIDENT BUSH

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AND THE U.S. AND OPENLY STATED THEIR INTENTION OF VOTING FOR THE OPPOSITION. FOOD APPEARS TO BE IN SHORT SUPPLY IN TIRANA. END SUMMARY.

2. THE DIPLOMATIC MISSION LED BY DAVID SWARTZ AND INCLUDING SUSAN SUTTON, RICHARD MULLER AND FRANK SKHRELLI (VOA-INTERPRETER) ARRIVED IN TIRANA FROM ROME WEDNESDAY MARCH 20. THEY WERE MET BY MFA CHIEF OF PROTOCOL AND THE

AMERICAN DESK OFFICER. ON THE WAY TO THEIR ROOMS AT THE HOTEL DAJTI THEY PASSED THROUGH THE MAIN CITY SQUARE, SKANDERBEG SQUARE WHERE THEY SAW A BILLBOARD URGING CITIZENS TO VOTE FOR THE DEMOCRATIC PARTY. WORD QUICKLY SPREAD THROUGHOUT THE COUNTRY OF THEIR ARRIVAL IN REPORTS CARRIED BY ALBANIAN TELEVISION, RADIO AND THE PRESS.

3. IN TELCONS WITH EUR/EEY MARCH 20 AND 21, SWARTZ PROVIDED HIS FIRST IMPRESSIONS OF ALBANIA. DURING A LENGTHY AND CORDIAL MEETING WITH THE MFA CHIEF OF PROTOCOL, NO OBJECTIONS WERE RAISED TO ANY OF THE

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MISSION'S REQUESTS FOR COMMUNICATIONS AND TRANSPORTATION ASSISTANCE, THE RIGHT TO TRAVEL UNIMPEDED THROUGHOUT THE COUNTRY AND THE DESIRE FOR THE BROADEST RANGE OF CONTACTS WITH THE ALBANIAN PEOPLE. WHEN SWARTZ NOTED THAT IT WAS CUMBERSOME FOR HIM TO GO DOWN TO THE HOTEL LOBBY TO USE THE ONLY PUBLIC PHONE IN THE HOTEL FOR HIS LOCAL AND INTERNATIONAL CALLS, THE MFA QUICKLY ORDERED AND INSTALLED A PRIVATE PHONE IN HIS ROOM. WHEN HE NOTED THAT LINES WERE LONG AT THE ONLY FAX MACHINE AT THE HOTEL, THE PROTOCOL CHIEF SAID THAT THE MFA HAD ONLY ONE FAX BUT WOULD LEND IT TO THE MISSION FOR A BRIEF PERIOD SO LONG AS SWARTZ PROMISED TO IMPORT A NEW FAX FOR HIS OWN USE URGENTLY TO ENABLE THE MFA TO RECLAIM ITS MACHINE (THE MFA FAX WAS DELIVERED TO SWARTZ' ROOM SEVERAL HOURS LATER). SWARTZ REQUESTED A COPY OF THE ELECTION LAW IN ENGLISH WHICH WAS DELIVERED TO THE HOTEL LATER THAT DAY.

4. SUPPORTING UNDER SECRETARY KIMMITT'S STRONG APPEAL TO FOREIGN MINISTER KAPLLANI IN WASHINGTON THE PREVIOUS WEEK FOR VISAS FOR THE NATIONAL REPUBLICAN AND DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTES, SWARTZ STRESSED THAT IT WAS VERY IMPORTANT FOR ALBANIA TO ALLOW THE AMERICAN PARTY INSTITUTES IN TO OBSERVE THE MARCH 31 ELECTIONS. ON MARCH 21 THE ALBANIAN MISSION IN NEW YORK INFORMED BOTH INSTITUTES THAT THEIR

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VISAS HAD BEEN AUTHORIZED AND THEY WERE FREE TO TRAVEL.
REPUBLICAN INSTITUTE OBSERVERS DEPART SUNDAY MARCH 24, AND
DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTE OBSERVERS DEPART TUESDAY MARCH 26 FOR
ALBANIA.

5. SWARTZ' OVERALL PRESENTATION TO THE MFA FOCUSED ON
THREE MAIN POINTS: 1) THE NEED FOR BROAD AND UNHINDERED

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CONTACTS WITH THE ALBANIAN PEOPLE AND OFFICIALS; 2) THE
ABSOLUTE IMPORTANCE THAT THE MARCH 31 ELECTIONS AND APRIL
14 RUNOFFS, AND THE CAMPAIGN LEADING UP TO THEM, BE FULLY
FREE AND FAIR; AND 3) THE MISSION'S INTENTION TO BEGIN THE
PROCESS OF REESTABLISHING A PERMANENT U.S. DIPLOMATIC
PRESENCE.

6. SWARTZ REPORTED THAT PEOPLE ON THE STREETS IN TIRANA
AND ELBASAN (ONE AND ONE-HALF HOURS SOUTHEAST OF TIRANA)
HAD SURROUNDED THEM IN THEIR WALKABOUTS. PEOPLE WERE VERY
EXCITED THAT THE TEAM WAS THERE AND EXPRESSED STRONGLY
PRO-AMERICAN VIEWS. NUMEROUS POSITIVE COMMENTS WERE MADE
ABOUT PRESIDENT BUSH: "LONG LIVE GEORGE BUSH;" "WE WISH
WE WERE AMERICANS SO WE COULD VOTE FOR GEORGE BUSH."
AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE AND WORKERS WHO TALKED WITH THE
MISSION, THERE IS A MOOD OF ANTICIPATION REGARDING THE
ELECTIONS, ACCOMPANIED BY OPEN DECLARATIONS OF THEIR
INTENTIONS TO VOTE FOR THE OPPOSITION DEMOCRATIC PARTY.
HOWEVER, EMOTIONS ARE RUNNING HIGH.

7. SWARTZ REPORTED THAT THE DEMOCRATIC PARTY IS CLEARLY
THE DOMINANT FORCE AMONG THE POLITICAL OPPOSITION.
EVERYWHERE THE MISSION TRAVELED ALBANIANS FLASHED THE "V
FOR VICTORY" HANDSIGN OF THE DEMOCRATIC PARTY. THE
DEMOCRATS ARE RUNNING CANDIDATES IN ALL 250 (SINGLE
MEMBER) DISTRICTS OF THE NEW PARLIAMENT. THE NEXT LARGEST
OPPOSITION GROUPING, THE REPUBLIC PARTY PLANS TO RUN 166
CANDIDATES, THE AGRARIAN PARTY IS FIELDING 37 CANDIDATES,
AND THE ECOLOGY PARTY HAS PUT FORWARD CANDIDATES IN ONLY
TWO DISTRICTS. THE ALBANIAN WORKERS (COMMUNIST) PARTY HAS
NOMINATED CANDIDATES IN 243 DISTRICTS REPORTEDLY AVOIDING

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CHALLENGES TO OPPOSITION LEADERS IN SEVEN DISTRICTS TO

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ENSURE THAT THE OPPOSITION IS REPRESENTED AT A SENIOR LEVEL IN THE NEW PARLIAMENT.

8. THE MISSION OBSERVED A DEMOCRATIC PARTY RALLY IN ELBASAN ATTENDED BY SEVERAL THOUSAND PEOPLE. THE INDEPENDENT TRADE UNION WAS THERE ALSO. THE RALLY WAS PEACEFUL, WITH A FEW POLICE ON THE FRINGES AND NO SIGN OF INTIMIDATION BY THE AUTHORITIES.

9. AT A MARCH 21 MEETING WITH DEMOCRATIC PARTY LEADERS AND ACTIVISTS, SWARTZ WAS TOLD THAT THEY BELIEVE THE ELECTION IS LIKELY TO BE FREE AND FAIR IN ITS MECHANICS. HOWEVER, THEY ARE WORRIED THAT THE COMMUNISTS WILL USE MANIPULATION/INTIMIDATION TACTICS AMONG THE RURAL POPULATION TO ENSURE HIGH VOTER TURNOUT AND SUPPORT. SIXTY-FIVE PERCENT OF THE POPULATION RESIDES IN THE COUNTRYSIDE. NONETHELESS, DEMOCRATIC PARTY LEADERS BELIEVE THAT THE OPPOSITION CAN WIN AND TALK CONFIDENTLY ABOUT WINNING 120 OF THE 250 PARLIAMENTARY SEATS. THEY ALSO TOLD SWARTZ THAT THEY WERE NOT GETTING ENOUGH ACCESS TO THE MEDIA, BUT NOTED THAT THEY RECEIVED ONE HOUR OF TELEVISION TIME PER WEEK. THEIR PARTY NEWSPAPER HAS ALSO

ATTRACTED A WIDE READERSHIP. OVERALL, PARTY LEADERS TOLD SWARTZ THAT THE MOOD OF THE COUNTRY WAS NOW CALM, WITH INTENSE EXPECTATIONS ABOUT WHAT THE ELECTIONS WILL PRODUCE. SWARTZ TOLD US THAT HE URGED THE DEMOCRATS -- AND WILL DO THE SAME WITH ALL OTHER OPPOSITION PARTIES -- TO WORK TOGETHER WITH OTHER PARTIES OF THE DEMOCRATIC OPPOSITION TO MOVE THE REFORM PROCESS FORWARD.

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10. A VISIT TO THE TIRANA MARKET REVEALED LITTLE TO BE SEEN IN THE WAY OF FOODSTUFFS. MEAT WAS VERY EXPENSIVE, 35 LEKS (ABOUT THREE DOLLARS) PER KILO, WHICH IS OVER A WEEK'S SALARY FOR MANY ALBANIANS. THERE WERE NO LINES OF BUYERS AT THE MEAT COUNTERS. FEW VEGETABLES WERE AVAILABLE, APART FROM SOME SHRIVELED CUCUMBERS. NO MILK OR DAIRY PRODUCTS WERE AVAILABLE, EXCEPT FOR A SMALL AMOUNT THAT IS RATIONED TO FAMILIES WITH SMALL CHILDREN. EGGS SEEMED TO BE RELATIVELY PLENTIFUL. SWARTZ URGED THAT CONSIDERATION OF SUPPLYING POWDERED MILK BE INCLUDED IN ANY DISCUSSIONS ABOUT U.S. HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE TO ALBANIA.



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11. SWARTZ SAID HIS TEAM HAD SEEN A NUMBER OF FOREIGN ELECTION OBSERVERS AND JOURNALISTS AROUND TIRANA. FOR EXAMPLE, AP HAS A STRINGER THERE AND A TIME MAGAZINE CORRESPONDENT IS MOVING AROUND THE COUNTRY. (FYI: THE ALBANIAN MISSION IN NEW YORK SUBSEQUENTLY INFORMED US THAT THEY HAD GRANTED VISAS TO A FIVE-PERSON CNN NEWS CREW.)
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