



HEADQUARTERS
MULTI-NATIONAL BRIGADE (EAST)
CAMP BONDSTEEL, KOSOVO
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415th makes a difference in local boy's life

Story and Photos by Spc. Christopher Gookin, U.S. Army

GORANCE, Kosovo – Months of prayers were answered for a 4-year-old boy and his parents due in special part to the determined kindness of the 415th Civil Affairs Battalion.

Lirim Berisha returned home to Gorance last month after successful surgery in the United States to correct a cleft lip and palate.

For the first time in his young life, Lirim is able to speak.

Members of the 415th, spanning back several rotations in Multi-National Brigade (East), helped facilitate the surgery after Berisha's malformation was discovered at a medical-civilian assistance program (MEDCAP).

"God bless American soldiers," said his mother Hamide Berisha, through an interpreter. "Without you we wouldn't have been able to help him."

The journey from Gorance to Portland, Maine – where Lirim underwent the surgery – was a multinational effort that showcased an incredible display of generosity. Heal the Children Northeast Inc., a Portland-based agency, coordinated the logistics. The Ronald McDonald House provided a place to stay for Lirim and his mother. American Airlines donated the flight tickets. A medical team at Mercy Hospital in Portland performed the surgery at no cost, and three Albanian families in Portland acted as a support network. A non-governmental organization (NGO) also assisted.

"Once we got involved, we found that he had more than a cleft lip," said Capt. Khristopher Scarcliff, a member of the 415th. "His palate was deformed and he would not have lived a very healthy life and possibly a short one."

Gathered in their home on a recent afternoon, Hamide and her husband Ahmet watched their son play with his brothers. Except for a small scar above his lip, it was hard to tell such an energetic boy was in dire straits.

A cleft lip is a separation of the two sides of the lip, according to the American Cleft

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Lip and Palate-Craniofacial Association. A cleft palate is an opening in the roof of the mouth, which is a result of the two sides not fusing together. Most cases are a combination of genetics and environmental factors.

“We saw an opportunity to build a bridge with Heal the Children for other children in this region to have a chance to receive surgery that cannot be offered here,” Scarcliff said.

Scarcliff is optimistic that Lirim’s success could open the door for other children in need of corrective surgery. His case could serve as a model.

During the war, Lirim and his family were forced to flee Kosovo.

“Lirim was just a baby,” Ahmet Berisha said. “When we fled, we put him in a basket, covered him with a blanket and went over the mountain to Macedonia.”

An American doctor first diagnosed Lirim while the Berishas were staying at a refugee camp. The doctor informed Hamide and Amhet that Lirim would need surgery.

If he had the surgery in Kosovo, there was a chance Lirim would not recover his ability to speak, the doctor said. If the surgery was performed in the U.S., the doctor assured them Lirim would be able to speak.

The Berisha family had neither the funds nor the resources for the surgery. It wasn’t until much later, during the previous MNB(E) rotation, that the support network was finally in place.

Lirim and his mother left for Maine on Nov. 12, 2002.

“The weather in Maine is much like Kosovo, but there is more snow there than here,” said Hamide.

Their new Albanian friends took them to McDonalds, malls, and The Portland Discovery Museum.

“They would pick him up for the night,” Hamide said. “So he did not have to spend every night at the (Ronald McDonald) house.”

The operation, which was the following week, was an anxious time for Hamide.

“All through the operation all I could do was watch him and wait for news,” she said.

“None of the hospital staff spoke Albanian.”

To ensure the palate has fused properly, Lirim is expected to undergo further surgery within the next five to six years. Arrangements will also be made to find Lirim a speech therapist.

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Lirim and his mother returned to Gorance on Dec.16.

Ahmet described his son as more energetic since the surgery, which was apparent as he squirmed in his father's arms and attempted to reach his Buzz Lightyear cell phone.

"It is good to have him back," Ahmet said.

Cutlines

Lirim Berisha (second from left) is surrounded by his friends from the 415th Civil Affairs Battalion during a recent visit to his home in Gorance. From left, they include Spc. Bradley Kendall, Interpreter Pepirim Mehite, Master Sgt. Adam Lamay, Capt. Kristopher Scarclif and Spc. Eddie Torres. To the right is his father Ahmet.

Lirim Berisha (left) and his brother Misin mug for a photo shortly after Lirim returned home on Dec. 16, 2002 after successful surgery in the United States to correct his cleft lip and palate.

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