

Albania Trip September 2011

September 2011 proved to be somewhat of a landmark for Rahma Mercy as it embarked upon another trip to Albania. What proved to be significant about this particular visit was that it was the largest group to date.

A total of 22 people flew out for the three day trip and for many within the contingent; it was their first experience of Albania. The group was also the most diverse in terms of make-up. There was a vibrant mix of youth and experience as well as brothers from all over England and a variety of professional backgrounds.

Over a third of the party consisted of Ulaama, for whom the trip was emotional, uplifting but most importantly a genuine insight of the work that has been carried out and of the work that is still required, and the future direction Rahma will move towards.



As we arrived in Albania and stepped out into the blistering late summer heat, it became apparent that we were in a country of visible contrasts. The captivating beauty and majesty of the landscape was frequently disrupted by the desperate poverty of the locals.

There was a sense of anticipation and slight nervousness as many amongst the group were unsure of what to expect or how to react when presented by the reality of this recovering Balkan state. However, as we arrived at our base and settled into our surroundings there was a real eagerness to get going and immerse ourselves into helping the people and engaging with the work.

The trip had been well planned and organised by both Moulana Khalil and his Rahma counterpart in Albania, Imam Jamal Duka, both of whom have been there since Rahma took its first steps to helping change lives of so many.

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The first day was a gentle introduction to Albania and the many projects Rahma supports. We arrived at a local primary school built and run by Rahma to open a brand new purpose built sports and play area.

Upon our arrival we were greeted by scores of smiling children, parents and staff most of who were delighted to see Moulana Khalil once again. The unexpected sound of 'God Save The Queen' echoed around the mountain as the ribbons were cut to open the playground. Prior to the official ceremony we were treated to a whistle stop tour of the classrooms and given a presentation by the principal of the school.

As we met the children it became clear to us of the conditions they lived in but that they had a real thirst for knowledge, they seemed content with what they had and possessed a genuine optimism and hope for their future. Along with this, they showed great love and gratitude to the people who support Rahma for enabling their progression towards a better life.



After leaving the school, the group split up and went to different mosques built by Rahma to observe the Jummah prayer. It was humbling to see Masaqid built around dirt roads and broken homes. They were basic structures but had become cornerstones of the communities. They were a centrepiece for the people and their lives and well being had improved as a result.

My group went Masjid Umar in Elbasan to pray. It proved to be a fitting visit for me as I live right opposite Masjid Umar in Leicester. Furthermore I was given the honour to give the Adhaan for the prayer, and it was a spine tingling experience to hear your voice bounce of the mountains calling people for prayer.



Once we completed the prayers, we met the locals who received us with love and gratitude. For me, it was this expression of unity that drove home the responsibility we as Muslims in the west have to our brothers in sisters in these less fortunate parts. We all know how easy it is to write a cheque for our Zakaat money, but this was evidence that the money is working in the right ways, and why Allah SWT has made it compulsory for us to donate. It is also a reminder that as humans we are all under the control of Allah and only through his will does anything happen.



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Most importantly, we were able to visit the site for the Rahma Academy and see the construction work being undertaken. This proved to be very significant as it was a chance to see where this project was happening and the community and people it will help. From my personal experience, it's totally different seeing this project that to just reading or hearing about it. It provided a real boost and impetus in the sense that this project will be a life changing one for so many people. I cannot emphasise just how vital this academy will be - we must support this!



The second day was busy to say the least. We were told the night before that it would be long and that we would be seeing a lot. For me, it was what I was looking forward to the most. I wanted that sharp reminder of how lucky I am to have so many luxuries in my life and that I should seriously think twice before I complain about insignificant and trivial matters.

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The day began with the distribution of monthly cash allowances to widows, orphans and families along with handing out food parcels that contained the bare essentials for existence. For some of the group, this proved to be highly emotional as we were overwhelmed by the number of people who attend, and the journeys they undertake in order to receive this assistance. In addition to all of this, it was a pure joy to meet the children and to have our pictures taken with them, and for some there was an opportunity for a friendly game of football!



Once this finished, we were then deployed throughout different parts of the city. Some went into the notoriously difficult to reach regions of the mountains whilst others drove into the heart of the gypsy communities. Although the group delved into the different parts, what we saw was universal throughout – the need for continuous investment and the constant reinforcement of Islam in people's lives.

My group and I visited a Muslim gypsy family who originated from India and had been in Albania for over 200 years. Once again, their welcome was warm and they invited us into their home. We sat with them on the concrete floor to hear about their plight and how 15 people manage to live in this small house. We listened as the matriarch of the family told us about the discrimination they face as gypsies, and how they have become the 'untouchables' of the nation. It wasn't easy hearing this, but seeing the smiles on their children's faces and how they were happy to be Muslims softened the blow slightly.

We also had the chance to see firsthand the Madressahs in action and met many of the students who are benefitting from Rahma's amazing work. We finished the day and headed back to our base feeling hot, tired but with a renewed vigour within our hearts.

The final day culminated in the main event – a gathering of the students and the poor and needy as they wanted to show their love for the people and supporters of Rahma. The children turned out smartly dressed and many performed recitations from the Qur'an and nasheeds they had been practising.

It was an amazing sight to see children as young as five or six reading impeccably as if they had been taught by Arabs themselves. Many of the group listened in complete stunned silence and were overcome by the enthusiasm of the students. The gathering also gave an opportunity for Zakaat money to be handed out personally to the many genuine and most needy cases.

The trip ended on a high note, and as we headed back to the hotel for our final night, we all agreed on how this trip completely blew away our expectations and the magnitude of the amazing work that has been carried out.

In conclusion, I would say that if you're thinking of visiting Albania as a volunteer with Rahma, then just do it. This is a unique initiative as you're not just helping people financially, but you're providing a hope for them that is spiritual and it's about the restoration of the most precious commodity any individual can possess – Imaan.

Our thanks go to Moulana Khalil Patel and Imam Jamal Duka for their efforts. May Allah SWT reward you in abundance for your work in this life and the hereafter – Ameen.