

Kosovo Honours its 'Saviours'

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Key figures from the NATO bombing campaign are immortalised by grateful ethnic Albanians.

Former American head of state Bill Clinton is on the road to immortality in Kosovo after a three-and-a-half-long km boulevard was named in his honour.

A 12-metre high photograph of him has also been erected as part of the stretch's 427,000 euro upgrade.

Kosovo's president Ibrahim Rugova said that such recognition was the least his people could do for a statesman who had garnered international support for NATO's 1999 bombing campaign.

"This is a very small thing we have done, as the former US president deserves much more," Rugova declared.

Indeed, Clinton's name lives on in many unique ways in the region, which remains a United Nations protectorate three years on from the conflict, with more than 32,000 international peacekeepers on its soil.

Businessman Ramadan Aliu, who is originally from Macedonia, has renamed his marble company after the former US leader. "Once heads of states leave their posts, many of them are forgotten. I wanted to make President Clinton immortal," he told IWPR.

A number of local bars and restaurants, meanwhile, have acquired names associated with American, NATO and British "liberators" who freed Kosovo from Yugoslav president Slobodan Milosevic's regime.

Aviano, the first restaurant every foreign visitor sees when they leave Pristina airport, is named after NATO's Italian military base. B52, BBC, Apache, Pentagon and Blair are also commonly used.

Elsewhere, the entrance to Pristina is now marked by a six-metre high replica of New York's famous Statue of Liberty, created at a cost of around 100,000 euros. "I can't say whether it will help trade because it's only been here a few days, but it's looking nice," said Avni Selmani, who manages a nearby hotel.

Pristina city council spokesperson Veli Bytyci said he has heard of plans for many other projects to name streets or erect statues in honour of foreign politicians, but ordinary Kosovars are also paying their own personal tributes.

For example, Gezim, an Ashkali from Fushe Kosova, has called his daughter Albright after former US secretary of state Madeleine Albright. "Why not? She saved us from war, and also the name is nice," he said.

When Gjakova resident Shqipe Bardhi's daughter was born two months after the end of the war, she named her Madeleine. "It was my husband's idea. She helped us a lot. She was our saviour," said Bardhi, adding that they plan to call their next child Clinton.

Staff at Pristina's civil registry office confirmed that there has been a definite trend towards such tributes. "Only three days ago, somebody named his son Tony Blair," said registry official Shefqet Bucaj.

Kosovars identify so strongly with America that they were deeply affected by the September 11 attacks on New York and Washington. Local television at the time showed many in tears and today there are a number of memorials bearing witness to the tragic events and expressing solidarity with the victims and their families.

One photo of New York with two candles where the twin towers once stood, reads simply, "America, we are with you."

With the conflict now behind them, the people of Kosovo are now working to rebuild and strengthen local institutions, but are also doing their best to see that those who helped them reach this point in their history are not forgotten.

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