

This is the hardest dispatch I've had to write. There is a weight on my heart that I don't know how to express, that makes everything I say seem trivial. Yet not writing doesn't seem like much of an alternative, either.

The past five days are a blur, except for certain images. The shock and horror on my friends' and colleagues' faces as they first heard the news of the attacks. The video footage of second plane flying into the World Trade Center. Watching the towers crumble. The strained quality of the rare laughter in the office. The stunned look in people's eyes.

Every morning I've opened my eyes to the feeling that a weight is pressing me to the bed. Every morning this week, I thought about not going to work. But the alternative, staying home and watching CNN, didn't seem any better. Very little got done at the office this week. People were too busy e-mailing their friends and family, or surfing the internet for the latest news, or drifting in and out of each others' offices, talking about what they had seen or heard or read. By Friday, the pace had picked up a little, it seemed like people were better able to focus on work, but its still going to be a while before the normal pace of work resumes.

There has been a surreal quality to this entire week. The weather has been perfect – sunny and warm during the day, clear and cool at night. There's a scent of roasting peppers throughout the city, as people prepare for winter by making ajvar and pindjur. It seems impossible that the world could be so beautiful.

The local staff have been wonderful this week – full of sympathy and understanding. Many of them have friends or family in New York City. And I've heard other stories, of people being consoled by their friends, of anonymous Macedonians offering condolences. One of our staff members who works in Kosovo visited on Wednesday, and he said that the border guards were incredibly nice and sympathetic. Border guards aren't nice to anyone, and lately they had been especially unpleasant to Americans. Since we can't be home with our friends and family right now, there has been a great deal of comfort in the support we've received from our Macedonian friends.

I hadn't realized how important it was to me, through all the uncertainty and stress we've faced in Macedonia over the past months, to know that the US was stable. I hadn't realized that that was a comfort until it was gone. My sense of disbelief only increased through the week as I heard of F-16s patrolling the skies over DC and New York, of destroyers stationed off the east coast, as my friends and family told me about their deep sense of insecurity and fear. It is so hard to grasp the fact that the country that I left less than two months ago is not the same country that I will return to for Christmas. I don't feel like there's any possible way I can prepare myself for the changes I'm going to find, the changes that will likely be all the more apparent to me because I haven't been in the US to go through them.

As for Macedonia itself, the parliament continues to struggle with the constitutional changes required by the peace agreement, the weapons collection continues, and NATO and the Macedonian government are disagreeing over whether or not NATO should

extend its mission beyond the current deadline. None of this is insignificant, but for me it pales beside events in the US.

I've seen further evidence this week of how the ongoing conflict in Macedonia has polarized the nation. One of the local news sites I check nearly every day featured a large article on Wednesday linking the leader of the NLA to Osama bin Laden. The "links" ranged from incredibly tenuous to practically nonexistent. It was grimly funny as an example of absurd conspiracy theorizing, but not funny at all as an example of the extremes that some people will go to in demonizing the Albanian guerrillas, and that just provides more fuel for those who would tar all Albanians with the same brush. On the other side of the divide, an Albanian friend told me that the flowers and candles that had been left outside the American embassy by the citizens of Skopje had all been placed there by Albanians, but that Macedonians had danced in the street.

On Friday night, my friend E. introduced me to some of her Macedonian friends, young women who attend the university. We talked about the attacks on the US, and the pictures we had all seen on the news of Palestinians celebrating in the street. One of the women said that she couldn't understand the Muslims, "it's like they're not human." The other said that "there is something evil about that religion. Its like they're capable of anything." E. and I tried to point out that these were only a few individuals, and that all Muslims shouldn't be judged by the actions of a few, but it was evident from their complete lack of response that they didn't agree. It illustrated yet again to me that there is a fundamental lack of understanding, and for many people, a lack of willingness to understand, that will take years of hard work to overcome to even a small degree.

The conversation with these women was very interesting, and sometimes upsetting, because, unlike our national staff, they haven't learned and haven't needed to learn what internationals do and don't like to hear. Very few of our staff have been as blunt as these women about their feelings toward the US. They said, "the US told us not to retaliate against the terrorists attacking our cities. So why is your president talking about retaliation now?" "Wouldn't the US attacking Afghanistan for helping terrorists be like Macedonia attacking Albania and Kosovo? The US wouldn't allow Macedonia to do that." "People in the US said that Macedonians were wrong to burn the mosque in Bitola after our soldiers were killed by a land mine, but now they are attacking mosques." It was very clear that they felt that Macedonia is on the wrong end of a deep double standard.

The opinions that I've heard and read over the past few days seem to indicate that there are some mixed feelings among Macedonians about these events. At the same time that they (those people whose opinions I've heard - I don't wish to indicate that all Macedonians feel this way) are distressed at the manner of the attacks, and horrified at the loss of life, they see themselves as victims of US policies. They don't think Macedonia has been treated fairly. They remember the US-led bombing of Serbia, and many of them have friends and relatives in Serbia who were affected. They feel like the US has thrown its weight around in getting the government to agree to the peace agreement. They see that they have become victims of the US' support of the KLA during the Kosovo crisis. They know the resentment and anger that some US actions

16 September 2001

and policies have generated. While there is nothing but shock at the brutality of the attacks, sympathy doesn't mean increased popularity for the US. One of my American friends was saying that she thinks that these attacks would give the Macedonians a way to relate to the United States, but I think that it's more like people here feel that the US should now relate more to them.

As for how this situation will affect my life and work here, HQ has told all offices overseas to be at the highest state of alert. All travel has been highly curtailed. The training I was supposed to attend (I would have been in Egypt now, as a matter of fact), has been postponed, as was the meeting I was supposed to attend in Indonesia in November. It looks now as if I do any traveling at all before the end of the year, it will only be within the region. Obviously, we're all now waiting to see what effects US retaliation will have. We're still on curfew. It is possible that anti-American sentiment in the region will increase, although I think that if it does, it's less likely to be related to the US' retaliation, and more likely to occur because of dissatisfaction with the peace agreement. Anything is possible, though. I will be careful.

Take care of yourselves.