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**PRESS RELEASE 35-03
For Immediate Release
August 13, 2003**

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203rd MPAD/Monteith PAO

TOURNAMENT UPTOWN MALISHEVO, Kosovo

The quaint mountain village of Uptown Malishevo buzzed with excitement and anticipation as the soccer players of 1-111th Infantry made their way up the hill-side village streets. They were en route to the small, dirt soccer field upon which they played in support of a tournament August 3.

The highlight of the event was to be the participation of Serbian players in the Albanian-hosted tournament. Yet, children of the quaint, Albanian village still rushed to greet the peacekeeping players as they waited for the arrival of a Serbian team from the village of Silovo.

“It’s time to start doing multi-cultural things,” stressed Uptown Malishevo Mayor Mejdi Selhani, who organized the event aimed at demonstrating the potential for the two groups to enjoy time they spend together and fostering the return of internally displaced persons.

Selhani placed the responsibility of a peaceful Kosovo directly on the shoulders of her leadership, saying good leaders should do “good things.” Selhani said he always wanted to do something good for both Albanians and Serbians and the tournament was the first time the village had hosted any Serbians.

“We need to improve our lives on every level,” Selhani said. “If we don’t improve our lives, nobody wins.”

The event almost did not happen as planned when the Serbian team was unable to make alternate travel arrangements when their driver/goalie was delayed according to Platoon Sergeant, Sgt. First Class James P. Watkins of B Company, 1-111th Infantry. However, in yet another splendid show of just what integral roles linguists play here, Interpreter, Ivan Gavrilovic packed himself and 5 soccer players into a tiny Volkswagen Golf and delivered the Serbian team in his own vehicle.

Freedom of movement in Kosovo was displayed as well when Serbian goalie Blanko Mitrovic showed up unescorted by security personnel in his vehicle. Mitrovic said that he passed through three Albanian towns on the way to the game and did so without fear for his personal safety.

“If I had fear in me, I wouldn’t have come,” said Mitrovic.

Watkins said the transportation situation showed how much the Serbians wanted to participate in the event.

Watkins expressed admiration for the courage of Selhani and surprise at how easy it was to get the soccer tournament together after being trained in the U.S. for several months relative to possible cultural problems in Kosovo.

“History has always shown that it takes brave people making brave decisions to change things,” Watkins said.

Uptown Malishevo lies within the area of responsibility of the 337th Engineers attached to 1-111th Infantry. Company Commander for Company B, 337th Engineers, Cpt. Curtis R. Drake praised the efforts of Selhani as well, saying he would like to see more proactive people such as the Mayor.

Drake said the tournament was a step in the right direction as it promotes not only the return of IDP's and inter-ethnic friendship, but also aids the transfer of authority from KFOR to Kosovo's civilian agencies.

“If steps aren't being taken by civilians, (KFOR must) do more positive work than we should have to,” said Drake.

Serbian Coach, Miroliub Antanaskovic said that the event made him feel good and is an encouraging development for the future of Kosovo.

“People should get together in sport, then they can get along in life,” said Anatanaskovic.

So, who won the contest? All who participated could claim ultimate victory for the day. When people are willing to put aside the issues of the past and move on to a productive, peaceful future together, everybody wins. The participants in this tournament show a willingness to do just that.

Events such as the tournament are the beginning fruits of NATO labor begun here in 1999. The villages represented in the tournament show themselves to be an example to their countrymen and an encouragement to the people of Kosovo that the realization of their hopes for a peaceful and prosperous future is within their reach.