

"Executed" Kosovar leaders reemerge: Easter miracle, or media fraud?

Barry Grey
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On Wednesday Reuters carried a two-sentence notice that the prominent Albanian Kosovar leaders Fehmi Agani and Baton Haxhiu had not, after all, been executed by Serb forces in the Kosovan capital of Pristina. Another wire service reported the same day that Ibrahim Rugova, the leader of the Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK), had not, as reported earlier, gone into hiding after Serbs burned down his home in Pristina.

"I am here in my home, where I've been since I returned from Paris with my family," Rugova told journalists on Wednesday.

The execution of Agani and Haxhiu had been widely publicized after a NATO military spokesman in Brussels on Monday cited "reliable reports" that they were among five ethnic Albanian political leaders, journalists and intellectuals murdered by the Serbs as part of a campaign to exterminate the cream of Kosovar society. NATO officials had previously reported the disappearance of Rugova.

Agani was a member of the Kosovar delegation at last February's peace talks in France. Haxhiu is editor-in-chief of the main Kosovo Albanian newspaper, *Koha Ditore*. Both are linked politically to Rugova's LDK, a more moderate wing of Kosovan Albanian nationalism that has been at odds with the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA).

The evening news programs on US television made no mention of the reemergence of Agani and Haxhiu, and the *New York Times* buried the story on page 13 of its Thursday edition. No explanation has been given either for the false reports of the deaths and disappearance of these Albanian leaders, or for their apparently miraculous resurrection.

Are we dealing here with a wondrous phenomenon of the Easter season, or an embarrassing exposure of the

thoroughly dishonest methods of the US and NATO, and their media mouthpieces? The reader can decide for himself.

One thing that has been exposed by the return from the dead of the Albanian leaders is the fact that the "reliable sources" cited by American and NATO officials are, more often than not, the KLA. The source for the reported execution of Agani and Haxhiu was the KLA news agency, Kosovapress.

On Thursday it was reported that Rugova was in Belgrade seeking to negotiate a basis for ending the warfare with Serb President Slobodan Milosevic. Any such initiative is anathema to the KLA, which considers the pro-autonomy LDK a political obstacle to obtaining independence for Kosovo, with the aid of American and NATO military power.

Given these political realities, KLA reports of the death and disappearance of LDK leaders take on a sinister cast. Many questions are raised. Who would be better served by the elimination of the LDK, Milosevic--who might view the LDK as a more palatable ethnic Albanian alternative to the KLA guerrillas--or KLA head Hashim Thaci? It is not far fetched to suggest that Rugova, Agani, Haxhiu and other LDK leaders have been targeted for elimination by the KLA, which issued reports of their disappearance and death prematurely.

Another story reported prominently by the American and European media on Wednesday was the charge that Serbia had set up concentration camps in Kosovo, into which tens of thousands of ethnic Albanians were being herded. German Defense Minister Rudolf Scharping told a press conference Wednesday morning that he had "serious reports" of such camps. He said these reports, as well as the reported execution of Agani and Haxhiu, "brought to mind ... tactics used by Nazi Germany."

The previous evening, KLA leader Thaci said in an interview on German television that the main stadium in Pristina was being used as one such camp, and 100,000 people were being held there.

But later on Wednesday, at a US State Department briefing, a journalist cited an independent report from a newsman who visited the stadium and found neither prisoners, nor any evidence that large numbers of people had been in the facility in recent days. The reporter asked State Department spokesman James Rubin, in light of this development, to comment on the reliability of the KLA as a source for US reports on events in Kosovo. Rubin dodged the issue, but acknowledged subsequently that Thaci was his source for other atrocity allegations, and indicated that he is in daily contact with the KLA leader.

Serb forces are carrying out brutal actions against civilians in Kosovo, and opposition to the US-NATO war does not imply the slightest support for the regime of Serbian President Milosevic or his chauvinist and repressive policies. But it is impossible to obtain an objective picture of what is happening in Kosovo--the extent of Serb violence, the role of the KLA in attacking Kosovan Serbs, the destructive impact of NATO bombing on the Kosovars--under conditions in which official and media reports are dictated by the political and military aims of the US and its KLA allies.

Given Washington's record of militarism and covert operations on the international arena, and the notorious role of the American media as an adjunct of the Pentagon and the CIA, no conscientious observer can accept as good coin any claims that are being made so long as there is no credible, independent verification.



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