Greece: Antiwar protests intensify

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Protests against the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia are sweeping Greece almost daily. They reached a new height April 29 when some 200 British trucks carrying containers, and military vehicles were pelted with fruit and vegetables after demonstrators moved NATO road signs to redirect the convoy into an outdoor market in Thessaloniki.

What was said by one participant to be an attempt to "show in a humorous way that across Greece people don't like what NATO is doing" is part of a wide and growing protest involving thousands of working people throughout the country.

Earlier, demonstrators blocked rail lines to stop a Skopje-bound train carrying 72 British tanks and 31 light armoured vehicles from leaving Thessaloniki, the country's second largest city and the major port for shipments to Macedonia. The equipment, part of the second British Battle Group being deployed in Macedonia, had just been unloaded from a British freighter, the Sea Centurion.

British Army reinforcements were confronted with demonstrators at the port of Thessaloniki. This followed an attack on a train carrying Scimitar light reconnaissance tanks. Headlamps and windscreens were smashed and batteries and aerials were removed as the train was shunted out of the port to be prepared for the journey to Macedonia.

All movement of British military vehicles by train from Thessaloniki has been stopped, as the unions have now called a rail strike.

On April 23 Thessaloniki's Municipal Council voted unanimously against Greece providing logistical support for NATO forces planning a ground offensive in Kosovo. Mayor Vassilis Papgeorgopoulos told reporters that the bombing of Yugoslavia contravened the NATO charter and, as such, the article did not cover Greek support. Thessaloniki's port and airport are key transit points for NATO troops and equipment if a ground attack is decided. To date, NATO has been using the city as an entry point for troops and equipment involved in a peacekeeping force based in Skopje, the Macedonian capital, and for refugee relief.

On the island of Corfu in the Ionian Sea, west of the Greek mainland, thousands of protesters staged running battles with riot police after spotting NATO aircraft on the tarmac at the island's small international airport. Corfu is used as a transit point, supposedly for aid to Albania.

On April 25 hundreds of protestors formed a "human shield" around the building used by the US government-run Voice of America radio service in the northwest town of Xanthi, in protest against the NATO bombing. Members of the Eastern Macedonia and Thrace Committee for Peace told the press that VOA was broadcasting messages of war and slogans against Yugoslavia and Slobodan Milosevic.

Speaking last week at the summit held to commemorate NATO's 50-year anniversary, Greek Prime Minister Costas Simitis warned that the Kosovo crisis could lead to widespread destabilisation in the Balkans. He said this is already affecting Macedonia and Albania.

The NATO offensive in Yugoslavia has provoked a serious crisis for the PASOK social democratic government. Greece is a member of NATO but has been reluctant to participate directly in the offensive against the Serbs. Opinion polls show that more than 90 percent of Greeks are against the war. On Thursday, Greece abstained in a vote of EU member-states' permanent representatives that approved the regulations concerning the oil embargo against Yugoslavia.

The main conservative opposition party has sought to capitalise on the mass opposition to the war, advancing a nationalist pro-Serb platform and condemning the NATO bombing. The disturbances in Thessaloniki, as well as protests against the air strikes in most major

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cities, could lead to the collapse of the PASOK government. The likelihood of this has increased with the possibility that Greece may be asked to provide logistical help for a ground invasion.

This could produce precisely the doomsday scenario on NATO's southern flank which US President Clinton cited as one reason for launching the bombing attacks. A change of government in Athens might bring Greece to declare against the air strikes and close the port of Thessaloniki for military traffic supplying NATO ground forces stationed in Macedonia. Such a development could lead to the expulsion of Greece from NATO, dramatically increasing tensions in the Aegean and igniting hostilities between Greece and Turkey, which are longstanding enemies despite common membership in NATO.

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