

NATO troops clash with Kosovan Serbs and Albanian protesters in Mitrovica

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NATO's KFOR troops confronted up to 50,000 ethnic Albanian protestors in the northern Kosovan town of Mitrovica on Monday. At one point, British, Canadian and French troops used tear gas against several hundred protestors who were attempting to storm the Ibar Bridge into the mainly Serb-inhabited north of the town. The protestors were part of a march which had set out that morning from the Kosovan capital, Pristina, demanding an end to the de facto partition of Mitrovica into Albanian and Serb enclaves.

Mitrovica is one of the few remaining towns in Kosovo with a substantial Serb population. It is divided into two ethnic cantons, separated by the river Ibar. The southern part is home to 49,000 Albanians and a handful of Serbs, whilst the north is divided between 12,000 Serbs and 2,000 ethnic Albanians.

The march was organised by the separatist Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), which is seeking an independent Kosovo as part of a Greater Albania. The KLA functioned as the political proxy of the United States during last spring's war against Serbia, and has utilised NATO's intervention to establish its own political control of Kosovo, expelling hundreds of thousands of Serbs and other minorities.

Since KFOR troops entered Kosovo last June, the United Nations estimates that 250,000 Serbs and other non-Albanians have fled and up to 400 have been killed. The remaining Serbian enclaves dotted throughout the province, containing approximately 50,000 people, are without hospitals and many other vital facilities.

KLA demands for Mitrovica's "unity" means, in practice, driving the remaining Serbs out of the town. While KFOR troops prevented the demonstrators crossing over the bridge, NATO spokesmen indicated to the crowd that they supported their demands. The commander of the peacekeeping force, Klaus Reinhardt, said from atop a British tank that the demonstrators "have shown the way they want to live... They want a united city."

The British commander on the bridge, Lt. Col. Nick Carter, addressed the demonstrators through a bullhorn and declared his own desire for a united Mitrovica. Later he told the media that the present Western policy of maintaining a Serbian enclave in Mitrovica was "not tenable".

Given the highly volatile situation in Mitrovica, serious questions are raised as to why, after apparently agreeing earlier that only a handful of ethnic Albanian protestors would be allowed into the town to present their demands to NATO authorities, KFOR permitted the protest march to reach the heavily-fortified bridge and threaten Serb inhabitants.

The town has been the scene of violent clashes between Serbs and Albanians over the last eight months. At the beginning of February, a rocket attack on a UN-escorted bus 15 kilometres southwest of

Mitrovica killed two Serbs and injured five others. Days later, grenade attacks on two Serbian cafes injured at least 21 people. This was followed by the gunning down of an elderly couple of ethnic-Turkish origin in their apartment and violent clashes between Serbs and Albanians. KFOR says it has escorted some 100 ethnic Albanians to the southern part of the town as a temporary measure.

On Saturday February 12, hundreds of stone-throwing Albanians attempting to cross the Bridge of Austerlitz to northern Mitrovica were beaten back by KFOR soldiers using tear gas and truncheons. Some 41 people, including 11 French soldiers, were injured.

Local members of the NATO-backed Kosovo Protection Corps (KPC) eventually brought this demonstration under control. The KPC, established by NATO as a supposedly mixed civilian emergency unit, comprises up to 5,000 KLA soldiers who are meant to be largely unarmed. It is under the command of KLA leaders.

The KPC is supposed to have a quota of 10 percent non-Albanian minorities, but does not include a single Serbian or Roma recruit. The KLA routinely describe the KPC, known by its Albanian initials TMK, as an independent Kosovo army-in-waiting.

The KLA separatists have been emboldened by KFOR's actions in the region. On February 20 KFOR carried out provocative raids on homes and buildings in northern Mitrovica. The raids, the largest military operation of its kind by KFOR in the province, sparked violent clashes between Serbs and US and German soldiers.

Residents had been informed of the operation just 24 hours before by loudspeaker announcements and leaflets bearing warnings to co-operate fully. The raids, involving more than 2,000 soldiers, were ostensibly conducted to recover weapons. In the event, less than 15 weapons were found.

US KFOR troops sealed off the northern section of the town using barbed wire and armoured personnel carriers. At around 6am, troops blocked the area around the Kosovska Mitrovica University School of Engineering and the engineering college.

Professor Dragan Radulovic, who lectures at the school, reported that KFOR stormed the building, evacuating students and ransacking offices. The school's laboratory, computers and other equipment were destroyed. There were also reports that troops attempted to search students' living quarters and a local children's clinic. KFOR then began to search nearby buildings and flats, breaking down doors and threatening residents with rifles.

Nearly 2,000 Serbs gathered in protest, throwing stones and snowballs at the troops, shouting "fascists". Small numbers of protesters broke through a cordon of French soldiers to attack the US troops, who beat them back with riot shields and rifles. Several protestors were injured, including two who were smashed in the face

with rifle butts.

According to Yugoslav reports, the US and German troops were utilised for the operation because French forces were considered too sympathetic to the Serbs. They also alleged that KLA soldiers, in the guise of KPC "interpreters", participated in the raid.

The British *Independent* newspaper quoted one French policeman as saying, "The Americans believe in being aggressive. We think the main thing is to maintain calm". The US forces eventually had to be redeployed.

The last several weeks of ethnic violence in Mitrovica began just days after the UN informed the KLA that it would have to dismantle a number of "security organisations", which had been working with NATO forces over the past eight months of occupation. This move is aimed at integrating the KLA into a new "power-sharing" council, which is to take over limited authority for the province.

The unofficial Kosovo parliament was dissolved at the beginning of this month to make way for a new power-sharing executive. So far, Kosovo Serbs have refused to participate in the interim council, accusing the body of pro-KLA bias and questioning whether all parallel KLA-dominated organisations have been dissolved.

BBC defence correspondent Jonathan Marcus reported that "on the ground it is the political reincarnation of the ethnic-Albanian Kosovo Liberation Army that is firmly in control in much of the province." The KLA has integrated itself into the various UN structures. Its military command has transferred to NATO's KPC. Other KLA officers have become involved in economic bodies, using their powers to commandeer former Serbian property and businesses.

The UN is particularly keen for the KLA's security organisation, the so-called Ministry of the Interior, to be formally closed down. This KLA-run body is seen as a potential challenge to NATO's authority in the region and as having been responsible for a number of destabilising attacks.

Sections of the KLA are reluctant to disarm, as the new power-sharing council's limited role would leave many local commanders without weapons or positions of authority. In an interview with Reuters on February 11, Jonathan Eyal of the British Royal Institute of Defence Studies said, "The current dead-end cannot last and the UCK [KLA] clearly may find it beneficial to sow discord and try to expel the last Serbs and force acceptance of Kosovan independence."

Yugoslav sources have also accused NATO, and the US in particular, of targeting northern Mitrovica as part of a plan to drive Serbs out of the province and declare an independent Kosovo.

Although an independent Kosovo is not the stated policy of the US, such claims have been leant further credibility by recent threats against Yugoslavia from Washington. On February 21 Richard Holbrooke, US Ambassador to the UN, blamed Belgrade for that day's confrontations at the Ibar Bridge.

"This is being stirred up by the MUP (Yugoslav Interior Ministry), by the Yugoslav authorities—and the Yugoslav leadership is directly responsible for this," Holbrooke said. NATO Secretary General George Robertson said the Western military alliance was monitoring a Yugoslav troop buildup in other ethnic Albanian areas of southern Serbia—towns such as Merdare, Bujanovac and Presevo located in the three-mile wide zone around Kosovo from which Serbian troops are excluded.

NATO policy regarding Kosovo is in a perpetual state of crisis. Having demonised the Serbs and glorified the KLA to justify its military intervention against Belgrade, the US was forced to cede power in Kosovo to the Albanian separatist organisation that less than

two years before it had described as "terrorist" and linked to mafia elements involved in drug trafficking. Ever since, NATO has for the most part turned a blind eye to the KLA's ethnic cleansing of Serbs and other minorities, while some Western representatives have expressed concern over its criminality and separatist ambitions. This is what lies behind the attempts to place the KLA on a tighter leash.

The European powers supported the war against Serbia so as not to lose out to the US in what it considers its own backyard. But as French complaints against recent US actions show, divisions between the Western powers over the future of the province are mounting, as the US, Britain, France and Germany each pursue their own strategic interests in the Balkan region. In April, five European countries—Belgium, France, Germany, Luxembourg and Spain—are to take command of KFOR.

For their part, the Albanian masses are increasingly feeling the brunt of the NATO occupation forces that were ostensibly sent into Kosovo to protect them. The reported rape and murder of an 11-year old Albanian girl by a US soldier last month has sent shock waves throughout the Albanian population, which only a few months before had greeted the American troops as saviours. The soldier, Staff Sergeant Frank J. Ronghi, is alleged to have told a private who helped him bury the girl's body that it was "easy to get away with something like this in a Third World country".

As the recent events in Mitrovica show, it is by no means ruled out that NATO troops will end up shooting down Albanian and Serb workers and peasants alike.

In recent months there have been growing indications that ordinary Albanian Kosovars are chafing under the despotic and corrupt practices of the KLA. There have been reports of KLA reprisals against dissident Albanians as well as Serbs, and KLA forces seizing the businesses and other property of some Albanians. Meanwhile, the social conditions in the aftermath of the NATO bombardment remain extremely harsh.

The recent fighting in Mitrovica is not only a result of resentment between Albanians and Serbs resulting from the war and its aftermath. A major contributing factor is the struggle among the NATO powers, the KLA and Yugoslavia for control over potentially lucrative mines and mineral resources in the vicinity of the town.

Mitrovica is home to what some analysts consider one of Europe's most valuable mining complexes, the Trepca lead and zinc mines, which are also reported to contain deposits of gold and silver ore. The complex is situated in the Serb-dominated area and the major processing plants remain in Serb hands.



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