

KLA provocations in Mitrovica and southwest Serbia

Chris Marsden
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The Kosovan town of Mitrovica continues to be a focus of confrontations between Serbs and ethnic Albanians, but hostilities are rapidly spreading into Serbia proper. There are clear indications that the supposedly disbanded Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) is playing an instrumental role in inciting the conflict. They hope to create conditions for a renewed military offensive against Serbia and the realisation of their perspective of making Kosovo part of a Greater Albania.

Mitrovica is one of the few remaining places 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 contains 12,000 Serbs and 2,000 ethnic Albanians. It is the location of what is believed to be one of Europe's most valuable mining complexes, the Trepca lead and zinc mines, which also contain deposits of gold and silver ore.

March 7 saw pitched battles between Kosovar Serbs and Albanians in Mitrovica, during which 16 French NATO (KFOR) troops and 24 mainly Serb civilians were wounded. The incident began when a fight between an ethnic Albanian and a Serb provoked shooting. About four to five grenades were thrown and two rockets later hit a high-rise apartment in northern Mitrovica. Although the north of the city is predominantly inhabited by Serbs, KFOR has been forcibly evicting tenants and installing ethnic Albanians with the stated intention of restoring an ethnically mixed population.

The February 22 confrontation between KFOR troops and a KLA-organised march by 50,000 ethnic Albanian protesters demanding entry into northern Mitrovica via the Ibar Bridge has been followed by weeks of ethnic violence, which have left at least 12 dead.

Richard Holbrooke, US Ambassador to the UN, and NATO Secretary General George Robertson subsequently blamed forces under the control of Serbia for provoking

the conflicts in Mitrovica. On the ground, however, KFOR could not but acknowledge the part played by "agitators" on both sides. In the following days, KFOR troops resumed weapons searches in Mitrovica, in an operation entitled "Operation Ibar". Prior to the recent disturbances, 300 US troops searching for munitions had targeted buildings in the ethnic Albanian enclave of northern Mitrovica.

On Sunday, March 5, KLA leader Hashim Thaci spoke to a crowd of 20,000 and pledged to liberate Mitrovica and establish an independent Kosovo. But Thaci, who is now a leading member of the UN/NATO-sponsored Kosovo administration, made clear that his aims did not end there. He accused Belgrade of "pursuing a policy of ethnic cleansing and genocide against the Albanian population" in Presevo, Medvedja and Bujanovac, the main towns of southwest Serbia, and home to 60,000-70,000 ethnic Albanians. "We are ... studying the issue with the international community and in particular with those good friends of the Albanians, the Americans," he said.

Thaci has identified a major aim of the KLA—to take control of the entire Presevo Valley, east of the Kosovo border. They routinely describe this 482-square-mile region as "Eastern Kosovo" and have had military detachments operating there since November last year, according to the UN, and since late summer, according to Belgrade.

The KLA's forces are publicly identified as the Liberation Army of Presevo, Medvedja and Bujanovac (UCPMB). At the end of NATO's war against Serbia in 1999, a three-mile "buffer zone" was established between Kosovo—still nominally a Serbian province—and Serbia proper, which Yugoslav army units were not permitted to patrol. The exclusion zone includes the predominantly Albanian village of Dobrosin, but not Presevo, Medvedja and Bujanovac.

In January, the UCPMB killed three Serbs in Mucibaba, near Presevo. Serb policemen have been ambushed and killed and bombs have been planted. In Bujanovac, four bombs were detonated in February, one near an elementary school, two in a Gypsy neighbourhood and one next to a cinema. Attacks have also been made on Albanian politicians opposed to the KLA, including the murder of Zemail Mustafi, the Albanian vice-president of the Bujanovac branch of Slobodan Milosevic's Socialist Party. Recent fighting in Dobrosin resulted in 170 Albanians fleeing into Kosovo. Marcel Grogan from the UN's Office of Humanitarian Affairs was wounded in the leg in an attack near Dobrosin.

Following the war against Serbia, the KLA provided the military and political forces upon which NATO established its protectorate in Kosovo. But in relying on the KLA, the US has fashioned something of a rod for its own back. The KLA's gangsterism and corruption, its anti-Serb attacks and its repression of political opponents have made attempts to restore a degree of economic and political stability impossible. Moreover, the NATO powers and the US cannot but oppose its perspective of a Greater Albania, which would risk the destabilisation of the entire Balkan region.

Nevertheless, the KLA still hopes to benefit from its relationship with America. The UCPMB carries out military exercises in the shadow of US army checkpoints and observation stations on the Kosovo border, relying on the protection which the KFOR presence provides from Serb reprisals. KFOR spokesman Lieutenant Colonel Henning Philipp told the press, "We are aware of some people in groups who are aiming at destabilising the situation in the Presevo valley," but as yet KFOR has made no real effort to close the border to KLA forces.

Sources within the UN and the US armed forces have clearly identified the aim of the KLA's campaign in southwest Serbia. A UN official told the press they "are hoping that the Serbs will retaliate with excessive force against civilian populations and create a wave of outrage and pressure on KFOR to respond." Lt. Col. James Shufelt commented, "The concern here isn't that the Serbian police will come across [into the buffer zone], but that Albanian attacks on the Serb police and army will inspire a response great enough to cause public clamour for a KFOR response."

Such observations are not remarkably insightful, since this is exactly the *modus operandi* the KLA employed prior to NATO's declaration of war against Serbia. Under conditions of growing tension between ethnic Albanians

and Serbs, stoked by the Serb nationalist regime of Milosevic in Belgrade as well as Kosovan Albanian nationalists, the KLA waged a campaign of political assassinations, bombings and shootings inside Kosovo following the end of the war in Bosnia in 1995. The KLA's aim was to provoke Belgrade into intensifying its repression, while convincing the US that it could be a useful ally in any military attack on Serbia.

The US was eventually won to this position. On January 19, 1999 the Clinton administration demanded that Serbia withdraw almost all its security forces and grant Kosovo broad autonomy. The pretext for this, and the war that followed, was provided by the alleged massacre of 45 ethnic Albanian peasants outside the village of Racak on January 15. The Serbian government claimed that either the KLA carried out the killings itself to provide a pretext for US and NATO intervention, or took casualties from a previous fire fight between KLA and Yugoslav forces, dressed them in civilian clothes and fired single shots into the heads of each corpse to simulate a mass execution. To this day the truth about the events in Racak remains a matter of dispute.

At the time, Belgrade's version of events was dismissed out of hand by the NATO powers, and Serbia was ascribed sole responsibility for the deteriorating situation in Kosovo. America's previous description of the KLA as a "terrorist organisation" was abandoned in favour of depicting them as "heroic freedom fighters," which the West was obliged to aid in the struggle against Serbian tyranny. Today, the Western powers cannot deny a similar scenario of provocation by the KLA in Mitrovica and southwestern Serbia.



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