

Provocative raid into Serbia leads to clash between US troops and civilians

Chris Marsden
7 April 2000

US troops engaged in pitched battles Tuesday with local Serbs in the village of Sevce. Sevce is located in Serbia proper—beyond the border of the predominantly ethnic Albanian province of Kosovo, which became a virtual NATO protectorate following the military bombardment of Serbia last year—and near the Montenegro border.

A combined force of US military police and Polish troops entered the village to search the home of a man they had arrested for possession of illegal weapons. They were trapped after villagers pulled logs across the only road out.

Fighting broke out and the military police called for reinforcements. They abandoned their vehicles and fled the village through a narrow canyon leading to the neighbouring village of Jacinze. From above, the retreating troops were pelted with rocks all along the mile and a half length of the canyon.

At Jacinze, a strengthened military force of 220 battled with local Serbs, firing baton rounds and stun grenades and unleashing dogs. The US military said 11 of its troops were injured. A Serb woman managed to drag the arrested man to safety.

The independent Yugoslav news agency, Beta, said 14 Serbs were hurt, including 10 who were struck by rubber bullets at Jacinze. It placed the number of Serbs involved in setting up the barricades and opposing the US incursion at several thousand, coming from the villages of Gotovusa, Jazine, Sevce and Strpce. US army spokesman Captain Russell Berg denied that the dogs had been unleashed on the protesters. "The dogs were unmuzzled but kept on leashes," he said.

This is only the latest open conflict between NATO forces and Serbs. Up until now Mitrovica, situated in northern Kosovo, has been the principal centre of such conflicts. The town is the largest remaining enclave of

Serbs (16,000) and is divided into Serbian and Albanian areas. (Since NATO took control of Kosovo there has been an exodus of two-thirds of the province's 300,000 Serbian population out of fear of attacks by ethnic Albanians). But the focus is now shifting beyond the borders of Kosovo.

Tuesday's battle took place in the three-and-a-half-mile zone established around Kosovo's border, which the Serbian army is prevented from entering. This zone encompasses the Presevo Valley in southeastern Serbia, where up to 70,000 ethnic Albanians live. It has been targeted by the Albanian separatist Kosovo Liberation Army, with the aim of destabilising the region and eventually securing its integration with Kosovo within a greater Albania.

KLA guerrillas, calling themselves the Liberation Army for Presevo, Medvedja and Bujanovac (UCPMB), seized effective control of some villages in the Presevo Valley and have targeted Serbian police for attack. An agreement brokered by US diplomats with KLA leader Hashim Thaci last month has never been adhered to and Albanian paramilitaries have continued operations inside Serbia.

At the end of last month, the US dispatched an additional contingent of 125 soldiers to help monitor the border area. Defense Secretary William Cohen ordered the army to send fourteen tanks and six 155mm artillery guns to a 1st Armored Division company in Skopje, Macedonia as a further deterrent to Albanian operations. The State Department has issued an official warning to Albanians in Kosovo to avoid provocative acts in the Presevo Valley.

So far, however, nothing practical has been done to prevent KLA operations in Serbia. Instead, on March 28 around two dozen NATO forces crossed into the border zone for the first time to check on earlier

reported sightings of a Yugoslavian Army (Serbian) tank and an armoured personnel carrier. This was NATO's first major incursion into the border zone. Tuesday's raid on Sevice was the second.



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