

UN raids Serb-run factory in Kosovo to reassert its authority

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Over 900 troops of the United Nations force in Kosovo (Kfor) launched a dawn raid Monday to shut down the Zvecan lead smelter at the Trepca metals complex just north of the town of Mitrovica.

Violence broke out as workers arrived to start their shift. A crowd of around 400 Serbs hurled rocks at French, British and Danish troops. Six workers were injured after troops fired plastic bullets and teargas and then baton-charged the crowd.

The British, hated for their leading role in NATO's bombing campaign against Yugoslavia, were withdrawn and replaced by French troops in order to ease the tensions created by Kfor's provocative raid. Around 30 engineers locked themselves in an administration building at the Zvecan complex in protest.

The pretext for the raid was that the facility was the source of heavy industrial pollution, but the move was clearly a political attack on Kosovo Serbs loyal to the Belgrade regime of Slobodan Milosevic. The River Ibar divides Mitrovica into ethnic Serbian and Albanian enclaves, with the Zvecan plant located in the Serb-dominated north of the town, employing 1,800 Serbs. The plant once provided valuable revenue for Serbia and is one of the few sources of work in Kosovo, since NATO bombing destroyed many factories and workplaces.

The Zvecan smelter is part of the Trepca mining complex, made up of 40 mines that produce gold, silver, lead, zinc and cadmium. Control of Trepca's mineral wealth is the focus of constant disputes between the last remaining major Serbian enclave in Kosovo and the Albanian majority. Kosovo's ethnic Serb community was estimated at 200,000 on the eve of last year's conflict, but at least half have been driven out since the UN takeover, along with the majority of

Roma and other non-Albanians, by the threat of violence from the Albanian-separatist Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA).

The raid is part of a broader security operation to gain UN control of the entire Mitrovica region, which it has been in danger of losing in recent months. Kfor said they had registered 459 assaults in Mitrovica between January and June this year. In February, 1,500 Albanians were driven from their homes in the north as a result of ethnic violence, while hundreds of Serbs were forced to flee from the south.

In mid-July, three days of protest were mounted by Serbs calling for the release of Dalibor Vukovic, who was accused of setting fire to Albanian-owned cars on June 9. UN troops were subjected to repeated attacks. Police patrols were suspended for a time and the evening curfew moved forward by two hours to 10 p.m. Serbian leader Oliver Ivanovic complained of Kfor bias, stating, "Over the last 10 months, during clashes around bridges, we had more than 100 people injured and not a single Albanian is jailed. Fifty-three Serbs were killed or abducted and not a single Albanian is in jail." On July 15, Albanian forces bombed the Serbian Dolce Vita cafe in Mitrovica with mortars and grenades; a revenge bombing was mounted close to an Albanian area in the north of the city.

Bernard Kouchner, who heads the UN occupation force established last year, made clear Kfor's wider aims when he criticised Zvecan's Serbian management for working under the discipline of Belgrade and rejecting the UN's right to manage former Yugoslav state property. Such managers would play no further part in the running of Zvecan, he said. The factory's current director, who had been visiting Belgrade, has been denied access to Kosovo and some of his staff have been arrested. Kouchner announced that the

factory is now going to be run by an international consortium of US, French and Swedish companies.

The American UN administrator of Mitrovica, William L. Nash, was even more forthright regarding the aims of the raid, admitting that it was part of a much broader security operation and that the UN was intent on changing the structure of local municipal government. Nash said that the UN wanted to see a change in the political balance of local authorities. "We are quite anxious to deal with those people who are interested in democracy, and those that are not interested in democracy can go elsewhere. They can leave Kosovo in a variety of ways." UN sources said that members of Milosevic's Serbian Socialist party (SPS) would be removed from their posts.

The same day as the dawn raid, NATO soldiers shut down the Serb radio station Radio S in northern Mitrovica. The station's director is also a member of the SPS.

Earlier this month, Kouchner announced that municipal elections would be held in Kosovo on October 28. He described this as a major step towards the creation of the "substantial autonomy" for Kosovo within Federal Yugoslavia that was required by UN Security Council Resolution 1244, passed on June 10 last year.

The KLA, which dominates the Yugoslav province under UN protection, want this to be a further step towards the creation of an independent Kosovo and eventual unification with neighbouring Albania and have demanded full parliamentary elections instead. The KLA officially disbanded in September, but was transformed into the 3,000-strong Kosovo Protection Corps under nominal UN control. The KLA call the corps "Tomorrow's Masters of Kosovo", after its Albanian initials. In July, KLA leader Hashim Thaci, now president of the Kosovan Democratic Party (PDK), quit the UN-led joint administration over what he deemed its overly conciliatory stance towards the Serbian minority. Thaci has declared, "After success in the local elections, we must immediately work to organise general elections in Kosovo.... Only then will Kosovars breathe freely, because then they will have their legislative and executive institutions."

Kosovo's Serbs are opposed to the poll because they see it as a measure to strengthen the separatists and have pledged not to co-operate. Serbs have boycotted

the UN institutions and are refusing to take part in the ministries now being established. Kosovo's Turkish minority, based in the southeast, has also refused to register for the upcoming elections.

In response, Kouchner declared, "These elections are an opportunity to build democracy ... free, fair and democratic elections are the only answer to Mr. Milosevic's dictatorship." A measure of the democratic pretensions of the UN has been amply provided by its subsequent actions in Mitrovica.



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