

Ceasefire declared between Serbia and Albanian separatists

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A tense standoff on the border between Serbia and Kosovo ended with the declaration of an indefinite mutual ceasefire yesterday. Earlier, the government of Vojislav Kostunica had agreed to hold off a threatened counterattack against ethnic Albanian separatist forces, while demanding that NATO intervene to end hostile penetration into the Presevo Valley.

The present crisis began when ethnic Albanians of the Liberation Army of Presevo, Medvedja and Bujanovac (UCPMB), a front organisation for the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), attacked Serb positions in the Presevo Valley on November 21 and killed four Serbian police officers. The rebels took control of several strategic points and a key road in the buffer zone between Kosovo and central Serbia. The Yugoslav Interior Ministry estimated that about 1,000 ethnic Albanians were involved in the recent attacks. They had smuggled small artillery pieces and more than 100 small mortars across the US -patrolled border.

The UCPMB emerged as an organisation in January this year. Its declared aim is to unite three majority Albanian areas in southern Serbia with Kosovo, the Serbian province that has been under joint NATO and United Nations control since the end of the West's war against Serbia in June 1999. Around 70,000 ethnic Albanians live in the Presevo Valley.

Under an agreement signed by NATO and Yugoslavia last year, only 1,500 lightly armed Serbian police are allowed in a five-kilometre wide buffer zone established around the Kosovo border. The Albanian separatists have utilised this provision in order to advance within a few kilometres of the town of Bujanovac in southern Serbia.

In response, the Yugoslav government despatched heavily armed security forces, including a special anti-terrorist unit and tanks. Kostunica complained that, "It is crystal clear that K-FOR and UNMIK [the UN administration in Kosovo] have failed to do their part of the job properly." He sent letters to NATO General Secretary George Robertson and UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, warning that the conflict could "set the region ablaze". He arrived in Bujanovac late Monday, cutting short a visit to Vienna where he was

signing up to membership of the Organisation of Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). General Nebojsa Pavkovic of the Yugoslav army had warned that, "if there isn't good will in the international community to solve the problem peacefully, Yugoslavia will decide to purge all Albanian terrorist forces" from the buffer zone.

An estimated 3,000 civilians have fled the region in the past several days.

The latest conflict on Kosovo's border is indicative of the continued instability in the Balkan region—despite the hopes of the Western powers that backing Kostunica's Democratic Opposition of Serbia (DOS) and successfully deposing Slobodan Milosevic in October would install pliant regimes in all the former Yugoslav republics.

At a summit in Zagreb on November 24, the European Union (EU) had signed an agreement with Yugoslavia, as well as Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia and Macedonia to work for regional cooperation. The commitment to political dialogue, regional free trade and fighting organised crime, corruption, trafficking and illegal immigration was incorporated into "stabilisation and association agreements" as a path towards eventual EU membership.

In return the 15 EU member states agreed to open their markets to the region, with the aim of eventually creating "a balanced free trade area." French President Jacques Chirac, representing the current EU presidency, also announced a five-year aid package worth \$4 billion for the Balkans. Macedonia has already signed an association agreement with the EU and Croatia is expected to follow suit.

The declaration boasted that the summit had taken place "at a time when democracy is about to carry the day throughout this region", drawing attention to both the replacement of the nationalist regime of Franjo Tudjman in Croatia and Milosevic in Serbia. It claimed that this paved the way for an end to violence.

That the conflict over the Presevo Valley was already raging exposed the hollow character of such claims. Kostunica even warned the Zagreb summit that, "Today,

Kosovo is Europe's biggest problem, which could activate other, seemingly sleeping flashpoint outside the Balkans.” But this was swept under the carpet.

UN administrator Bernard Kouchner represented Kosovo and no representatives from the recently elected Democratic League of Kosovo government of Ibrahim Rugova were present. Rugova had beaten the KLA's political front, the Democratic Party of Kosovo led by Hashim Thaci, in the October election, which was boycotted by ethnic Serbs.

Kouchner insisted that the summit was not the time to talk about Kosovo's unresolved status. He noted that the majority Albanian population was set on independence, but added that UN Security Resolution 1244 provided an interim solution. In reply, Kostunica called the resolution a “dead letter”.

The EU is desperate to utilise Kostunica's presidency to ensure its dominance of the Balkan region. Kostunica has declared that, “The EU is beyond any doubt our strategic partner in both political and economic issues.” On November 15, he told the European Parliament that Serbia wanted to join the EU “as soon as possible.” But Europe's reorientation regarding Serbia creates a serious problem, given its past support for Albanian separatist forces in Kosovo, as well as its relations with Macedonia and Croatia.

All the nationalist factions in the Balkans are competing for Western investment and political sponsorship, which is exacerbating tensions between them. According to Britain's *Guardian* newspaper, Ireland, with a population of 3.5 million people, received more Foreign Direct Investment in 1999 than the entire Balkan region, with its 50 million population, did in the last 10 years.

The Croatian government and others fear that Kostunica now enjoys a favoured place with Europe, at their expense. The Zagreb summit, for example, was conceived as a means of highlighting the ascendancy of Stipe Mesic's pro-Western government in Zagreb. But Croatia was thrust into the background by the October 5 events in Serbia.

German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer attempted to reassure the participating countries that the EU, “wants to pursue a policy of equality”, but this did not seriously placate anyone.

The Serbian president's presence at the summit drew protest from Croatian nationalist demonstrators and demands that he apologised for war crimes. Croatian President Stipe Mesic said true reconciliation was impossible until refugees returned, war criminals were arrested and Belgrade clearly rejected the past.

Montenegro was forced to attend the summit as part of the delegation from the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, but its president, Milo Djukanovic, appealed for Europe to recognise the Montenegrin republic as an independent state

in a loose union with Serbia. He said he would call a referendum on independence by the middle of next year, with or without an agreement. His deputy Prime Minister, Dragisa Burzan, added that, “There is a clear, steady and unvarying request for independence and politics is like water: it must go with the flow”.

Emerging differences between the Western powers, and conflicting strategies for the region, form major factors contributing to Balkan instability. London's *Financial Times* described the drawing up of an agreement as, “more a reflection of deference to the EU's regional role than evidence of genuine Balkan unity.” The weekly Croatian *Nacional* complained that, “Paris has been open in showing that they want to use the meeting to set France up as the new political sponsor for Serbia, and in so doing to ward off the US, which is both politically and militarily up to its neck in the events in BiH and Kosovo, and Germany, who France claims has very strong influence over Slovenia and Croatia.”

The US has led two wars against Serbia, was the KLA's main sponsor and prime instigator of the semi-covert campaign to bring down Milosevic and install Kostunica. The European powers, however, have been determinedly seeking to consolidate their own political, economic and military grip over the Balkans.

US foreign policy is presently in open disarray. The Clinton administration was assumed to be supportive of demands by ethnic Albanians in Kosovo for independence from Serbia, with US Ambassador to the UN Richard Holbrooke cited to this effect only last month. That same month, however, Republican presidential candidate George W Bush suggested that US troops should no longer participate in Balkans peacekeeping. Such a dramatic shift in policy would leave Kosovar Albanian forces naked in face of a serious offensive by Serbia—provided that Europe can be persuaded to maintain its friendly relations with Kostunica should he choose to do so.

Under these conditions, notwithstanding the latest ceasefire, the conflict over the future status of Kosovo stands little chance of being resolved peacefully. All indications point to continued ethnic conflicts throughout the region as long as the nationalist parties, which function as clients of competing imperialist interests, dominate political life in the Balkans.



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