

Fighting in Macedonia threatens wider Balkan conflict

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Fighting between ethnic Albanian separatists and the Macedonian army has intensified this week. Eight hours of skirmishes on Wednesday on the outskirts of Macedonia's second largest city Tetovo left one dead and 13 wounded. Tetovo lies more than 70 kilometres (40 miles) from the Kosovo-Macedonia border.

The UCK (National Liberation Army) is one of two front organizations of the Kosovo Liberation Army. Its continued offensive makes a nonsense of the ceasefire negotiated by NATO on Tuesday with the other Albanian separatist force aligned with the KLA that operates in the Presevo Valley in Southern Serbia. Fighting also continued in areas surrounding the villages of Brest and Malino Malo, near Tanusevci, on the Kosovo-Macedonia border, where the conflict first erupted three weeks ago.

The deteriorating situation facing the Macedonian government and the NATO powers was emphasised by the first ever public demonstration of support for the separatists within the country's minority Albanian population, when thousands rallied in Tetovo's main square. Ethnic Albanians comprise one quarter to a third of Macedonia's population and the separatists are seeking their incorporation into an Albanian-dominated Kosovo.

The government in Skopje is a coalition of Macedonian and ethnic Albanian parties. The UCK has condemned such "collaboration" and is said to be working with the newly established hardline National Democratic Party, which is demanding a federated Macedonia.

Under the military agreement that ended the Kosovo war in June 1999, then Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic agreed to a five kilometre/three-mile-wide "ground safety zone" around Serbia's Kosovo province. NATO has now allowed hundreds of soldiers from Yugoslavia's 63rd Parachute Brigade into the eastern area around the Macedonian border, in order to force a retreat by Albanian separatists. Yugoslav President Vojislav Kostunica is also seeking military access to the zone along the northern border of Kosovo.

When signing the weeklong ceasefire on Tuesday, the separatist Liberation Army for Presevo, Medvedja and Bujanovac, (UCPMB) emphasised that it would not guarantee the safety of Yugoslav forces. UCPMB commander Shefket Musliu warned, "If someone shoots at the Serbs, we will not take responsibility." The UCPMB is seeking the incorporation into Kosovo of 70,000 ethnic Albanians living in the Presevo valley.

The decision by the US to sponsor the KLA as part of its

preparations for war against Serbia in 1999, a position it has maintained up until the most recent period, has blown up in its face. The KLA's expansionist aims, coupled with its criminal activities, such as drug running and prostitution, have become the major destabilising factor within the Balkans.

This has created major tensions between the US and the European powers within NATO, a measure of which was provided by an article in Britain's *Observer* newspaper on March 11. Citing senior European officers within K-For, the article stated, "The CIA encouraged former Kosovo Liberation Army fighters to launch a rebellion in southern Serbia in an effort to undermine the then Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic."

One European K-For battalion commander is quoted saying, "The CIA has been allowed to run riot in Kosovo with a private army designed to overthrow Slobodan Milosevic. Now he's gone the US State Department seems incapable of reining in its bastard army... Most of last year, there was a growing frustration with US support for the radical Albanians. US policy was and still is out of step with the other NATO allies," he adds.

The crisis in which US policy makers find themselves in the Balkans shows no signs of abating. France is urging that Macedonia should provide the first outing for Europe's Rapid Reaction Force, with the Continental powers acting independently of the US-dominated NATO. The US and Europe eventually agreed to allow Serbian forces to enter the demilitarised zone and possibly to assume its traditional role of policing the region. Britain wanted to send its own forces into the Presevo valley, but was blocked by Washington. The US administration hopes that Kostunica's regime will act as a more pliant vehicle through which to exercise control over the Balkans. After all it was thanks to US and European financial and political backing that he occupies the presidency.

Kostunica's politics differ very little from those of his predecessor, however. He is a Serb nationalist who fully endorsed Milosevic's efforts to maintain a unitary state in the former Yugoslavia against rival nationalist factions. To the extent that he is more amenable to imperialist demands, moreover, Kostunica has a professed pro-European aim and has made repeated statements hostile to the US.

In an interview with *USA Today* on Tuesday, Kostunica accused K-For of "direct collaboration," with Albanian separatists. Singling out the US, he cited what were nominally surveillance flights conducted by American helicopters that "gave the

impression of being used as a sort of logistics support to the terrorists rather than surveilling them."

Yugoslavia has also bridled at the restrictions imposed on its armed forces within the former demilitarised zone, which prohibit the occupation of houses, the use of helicopters, armoured cars, rocket launchers, anti-tank and personnel mines. Deputy Prime Minister and former army chief of staff Momcilo Perisic complained, "The Yugoslav Army will be in great danger, since it is not allowed to enter the area with heavy arms and armored cars."

The consequences of US imperialism's support for ethnic Albanian nationalism is only one manifestation of the destabilising impact of the Western powers' embrace of separatist movements as a means of breaking up the old Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

There is every possibility that Kostunica will utilise Serbia's political rehabilitation amongst the Western powers in order to reassert Belgrade's interests in the Balkans. This is made all the more probable because what remains of Yugoslavia is facing disintegration due to the national and ethnic antagonisms being whipped up by rival local elites.

Yugoslavia's only other remaining constituent republic apart from Serbia, Montenegro, has long been pressing for succession. Elections are due in April, the results of which the Djukanovic government will in all probability utilise as a justification for staging a referendum on separation shortly afterwards.

Montenegro is being joined on the separatist path by the northern Serbian province of Vojvodina, which is calling for a large degree autonomy from Belgrade. Kostunica's Democratic Opposition of Serbia (DOS) coalition includes three Vojvodina-based parties and promised the province self-rule when the DOS was in opposition to the Milosevic regime.

On March 2, the Vojvodina Assembly passed autonomy proposals, covering all aspects of government except defence, state security, the monetary and customs systems, foreign policy and the judiciary. Kostunica's Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS) voted against the draft laws and denounced the proposed plebiscite as the first step towards Vojvodina's secession from Serbia. A poll conducted on behalf of the Assembly's executive council claimed that 60 percent of respondents supported full autonomy.

Just as seriously, nationalist tensions are also erupting in Bosnia, which was also transformed into a Western protectorate following the civil war in 1995.

On March 3, the extreme right Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) threatened to declare a separate Croat mini-state in two of Bosnia's cantons within 15 days, unless the NATO-sponsored administration makes significant constitutional changes that would ensure the HDZ's political hegemony over the Bosnian Croat population. A decision to do so would mean that the Bosnia-Hercegovina (BiH) federation, set up under the terms of the 1995 Dayton Accord, would be in danger of erupting into ethnic conflict once again. The territory corresponds to the Croatian enclave of Herceg-Bosna, as it existed during the war.

The UN's High Representative for Bosnia, Wolfgang Petritsch, responded by dismissing HDZ leader Ante Jelavic from the tripartite Bosnian presidency and sacked three other senior HDZ officials. "They were spreading rumours within the Croat community in BiH that their nation is not equal to others,"

Petritsch declared, before warning, "This argument was used in the past by the nationalist leaders and there is no need for me to remind you once again that the war in former Yugoslavia was based on this perception."

US analysts have been made painfully aware that American policy in the Balkans has failed. The *New York Times* on March 12, for example, proclaimed, "NATO is floundering in the Balkans, reaping the consequences of a refusal to deal seriously with the problems and aspirations of the Albanians it went to war to protect." But there is no sign of a wiser policy emerging from within either the Bush Whitehouse or the Pentagon.

Despite their knowledge of the difficulties facing Kostunica and the fractious character of US/Yugoslav relations, the Republican administration has imposed a deadline of March 31 for the arrest of Milosevic on war-crimes charges and threatened to cancel aid to the country if this is not done.

There are major disagreements within the Bush administration and the Pentagon regarding American strategy in the Balkans, with a significant lobby arguing for a complete US withdrawal. At the beginning of this month, Secretary of State Colin Powell was forced to deny such plans, after the Deputy Director of Politico-Military Affairs for Europe/Africa at the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Brigadier General Keith W. Dayton, told a Columbia University symposium that Washington would pull its troops out by 2003. Despite Powell's denial, the US announced Thursday that it would go ahead with a planned withdrawal of 900 personnel from Bosnia, along with 16 Apache gunship helicopters, tanks and armoured vehicles. A report on CBS television stated that Bush intends to withdraw all but 1,000 of its forces by 2003.

According to the Institute of War and Peace Reporting, moreover, academics and US military officers at the Columbia University seminar "appeared to be in almost unanimous agreement that current state boundaries in the Balkans should be redrawn to create 'smaller, more stable mono-ethnic states'." The "new boundaries enshrining homogenous ethnic entities would follow the historical patterns and 'natural instincts' of Europe, as witnessed over the past 300 years", the IWPR reported delegates as saying.



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