

Western powers reject NATO intervention against Albanian insurgency in Macedonia

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The United States, the European Union and Russia are bereft of a response to the danger of yet another Balkan war being provoked by the fighting between ethnic Albanian separatists and the Macedonian government.

This week, the world's major powers all issued confused and sometimes contradictory statements on the Macedonian events. But in the main they were characterised by a reluctance to get involved militarily in a guerrilla war with the National Liberation Army, an offshoot of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA).

The Republican administration in the US has made clear it continues to oppose expanding its force in neighbouring Kosovo. Washington is also against sending American or NATO troops into Macedonia. Asked if the US would consider military assistance, President Bush replied, "We'll work with NATO to develop a strategy that will help Macedonia protect herself." State Department spokesman Richard Boucher told reporters, "We are operating within a UN mandate and intend to do as much as we can and look for other ways to provide support to the Macedonian government within that mandate... We're not looking at ways to move NATO troops across the border into Macedonia."

A spokesman pointed to the existence of a reserve force of about 300 British and Norwegian soldiers already sent to strengthen patrols of the Kosovo-Macedonia border.

America's reluctance to see a military escalation in Macedonia is shared by the European powers, though there are clear indications of differences.

On Monday, NATO Secretary-General Lord Robertson said the alliance must increase its peacekeeping force in Kosovo to seal the border with Macedonia. He was speaking after talks with Macedonia's Foreign Minister Segan Kerim in Brussels, where he promised K-For would send reinforcements to the southern border of Kosovo. "We'll be asking individual members to add to the troops they have in Kosovo in order that more flexibility can be given to the task," Robertson said prior to a special meeting of EU foreign ministers.

In the end, both NATO and EU officials assured Macedonia of their full economic and diplomatic support. However, there was little sign of willingness to send anything more than military advisors and support personnel, and to date, no NATO

government has responded to requests for reinforcements in Kosovo. According to a report in Britain's *Guardian* newspaper, Robertson had asked 10 days ago that two extra battalions numbering 1,400 troops be sent to Kosovo, following an appeal by Lt General Carlos Cabigiosu, the commander of K-For. None were sent, with Britain's Ministry of Defence stating that there were no plans to add to the 3,300 British troops already in Kosovo.

The prevalent view amongst the European powers is that Macedonia must take responsibility for defeating the ongoing Albanian insurgency on its territory. The EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs Javier Solana told the Skopje government not to negotiate with "terrorist" forces. In response, Macedonia launched its most blistering military bombardment to date, directed at the hills surrounding the town of Tetovo on Tuesday. This was meant to reinforce a 24-hour ultimatum, calling on the Albanian guerrillas to withdraw from Macedonia or to give themselves up.

The second aspect of Western strategy is to rely on Yugoslav troops to police the disputed Kosovo-Macedonia border area. Last Friday, General Cabigiosu said that in future there should be fewer troops deployed because it was no longer necessary to be equipped to fight the Yugoslav army. Instead he has asked for specialized forces capable of containing civil unrest and monitoring Kosovo's borders. "It's not possible to discuss the future of Kosovo without a normal relationship with Belgrade," he insisted.

Dissenting voices at the EU foreign ministers' meeting calling for a more aggressive military response met with public rebuke. Austrian Foreign Minister Benita-Maria Ferrero-Waldner said the EU should ask the United Nations to discuss expanding its policing mission on the Balkans to include Macedonia. Austria was supported by Greece, but opposed by all other EU member states.

Earlier, the UN special Balkans envoy, former Swedish Prime Minister Carl Bildt, had declared that a war was being waged in Macedonia. In response, German Defence Minister Rudolf Scharping told reporters, "Mr Bildt should inform himself more precisely and be somewhat more calm and realistic in his comments than he has been in the last few days." Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer told the EU meeting that he also

considered it premature to talk about expanding Europe's military mission in Kosovo or Macedonia, and urged that the situation be discussed "calmly and responsibly."

The West's current efforts to contain the escalating conflict in Macedonia through secondary agencies are fraught with difficulties.

Firstly, Austria and Greece are not alone in calling for a military response. The most strident criticism of the US and EU position has come from Russia. Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov, speaking prior to a meeting with Macedonian President Boris Trajkovski, said, "The international community must help... The extremists have to know that the Kosovo adventure cannot succeed here."

Even if an uneasy agreement can be maintained between the Western powers, there is no guarantee that the Macedonian government will prove up to the task of suppressing ethnic conflict.

The government of Prime Minister Ljupco Georgievski is a coalition between his VMRO party and Arben Xhaferi's Democratic Party of Albanians (DPA). Both sides have come under fire from more hardline forces on both sides of the dispute.

The main Macedonian Slav opposition parties, led by the formerly Stalinist Social Democratic Alliance, have criticized the government for its concessions to ethnic Albanians and failure to suppress the guerrillas with sufficient force. More extreme Albanian nationalists are attacking Xhaferi's DPA for its "collaboration" with the majority Slav Macedonian government. The DPA, which complained it had not been consulted about the escalation of Macedonian army actions against the guerrillas, has said it will quit the government if a state of emergency is introduced.

Through their earlier sponsorship of the KLA, moreover, the Western powers have created a political Frankenstein monster intent on provoking a war it hopes will result in an independent Kosovo and territorial acquisitions in what is now Macedonia.

On Saturday, 600 German troops were forced to leave Tetovo because they were too lightly armed to defend themselves against the NLA. After Germany promised to replace them with a Leopard tank squadron, the NLA said that such a move by the *Bundeswehr* would constitute "a declaration of war by the Federal Republic of Germany".

The NLA has issued a public appeal for all able-bodied Albanians to join its war against the Macedonian government, and for Albanian policemen to "join the nearest units of the NLA." In response to the Macedonian government's 24-hour ultimatum to lay down their arms, an NLA commander said, "We will not leave our positions, we are going to advance and open new fronts. We are an organised army and we hold positions not only around Tetovo but in all the Albanian areas of Macedonia."

An article in Britain's *Sunday Times* points out that two of the Kosovo-based commanders leading the NLA offensive were

trained by former British SAS and Parachute Regiment officers in the secretive training camps that operated above Bajram Curri in northern Albania during 1998 and 1999. According to the *Times*, one is organising the flow of arms and men into Macedonia and "veteran KLA commander Adem Bajrami" is helping to co-ordinate the assault on Tetovo.

A British soldier serving with K-For is quoted as saying "The final irony of this is that NATO will be facing not only its own weapons but also its own tactics. And NATO simply can't handle a guerrilla war—the Albanians will beat them."

Significantly, the former commander of US forces in the Kosovo campaign, General Wesley Clark, issued an op-ed piece in the *Washington Post* not only urging K-FOR and NATO "interdict the flow of arms and fighters" across the Macedonian border, but for the Western powers to "recognize that the nub of the problem is the continuing delay in moving [Kosovo] toward democratic self-rule and the resolution of its final status."

General Clarke continued, "Troubles across the region are unlikely to ebb until Kosovars are fully engaged in building up their own institutions. Stabilizing Kosovo means following through on our promises and holding elections for a legislative body with real powers; moving forward on the transition to self-government; and committing to a clear timetable for final status negotiations."

The KLA, through its close collaboration with the NATO powers over the past years, is well aware that significant sections of the US ruling elite are in favour of extending and consolidating the division of the Balkans into a series of ethnically-exclusive states. This will only fuel their determination to press on with their campaign to destabilise Macedonia, in the hope that they will be amongst the main beneficiaries from whatever settlement is imposed.

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