

Open clashes between NATO and Croat separatists in Bosnia-Herzegovina

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Demonstrations by more than 3,000 Bosnian Croats took place on Monday in Bosnia-Herzegovina in support of Croat autonomy and to protest raids by NATO's Stabilisation Force (S-For).

The demonstrations come after a series of clashes involving Bosnian Croat separatists, NATO and United Nation's troops since April 5.

The rally was organised by the Bosnian Croat war veteran's organisation, which functions as a front for the Croatian National Union, or HDZ. The extreme nationalist party is leading the campaign to form a Croat mini-state corresponding to that set up during the three-and-a-half year Bosnian civil war that concluded in 1995, with the signing of the Dayton Accord. Since then, Bosnia has been run as a NATO protectorate, divided into a Serb mini-state and a Muslim-Croat federation. Now HDZ has initiated a separatist campaign to dissolve the Muslim Croat federation, threatening the further destabilization of the Balkans at a time when Albanian separatists organized from Kosovo are seeking the dissolution of Macedonia and the Serb republic of Montenegro is pushing for independence from Belgrade.

The HDZ's campaign has already spread to neighbouring Croatia, with war veterans mounting their own demonstrations at the Divulje base near the Croatian resort of Split and at another NATO facility at the port of Ploce. They have also promised to blockade NATO bases on the Dalmatian coast supplying S-For in Bosnia.

Last month the HDZ, the largest Croat party, withdrew from the Muslim-Croat federation and declared its intention to set up independent government structures to those administered by the Western powers. On March 19, it moved the deadline for self-rule back two months in order to take part in discussions with

NATO, the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the UN and other international bodies. Instead the intervening period has seen the HDZ step up its undeclared war against NATO and an aggressive response by S-For.

On March 28, the majority of the 7-8,000 ethnic Croat troops deserted from the Bosnian army, leaving their barracks following an order to disband by the HDZ's self-proclaimed Croat National Assembly.

The Assembly had previously been declared illegal and the Croat representative on Bosnia's rotating presidency, Ante Jelavic of the HDZ, was dismissed earlier this month for planning to establish an autonomous Croat state.

Bosnia's international administration warned that deserters would not be paid, but the HDZ promised to pay them 20 percent more than they were receiving from the federal army. With the barracks in Croat-dominated Mostar deserted, weapons storage sites were placed under guard.

The worst fears of S-For were realised on April 5. Ethnic Croat troops under the command of Colonel Josip Stojak, in charge of the Busovaca barracks, 35 miles west of Sarajevo prior to the mass desertion, returned to challenge the control of the barracks by Colonel Marinko Palavra, who had been installed by the Muslim-Croat federation government. The barracks in Vitez were also taken over by Croat forces.

The previous day, police officials in two regional police headquarters in the south said that 99 percent of their officers support the nationalists and did not recognize the government, after the circulation of an HDZ petition.

On April 6, NATO troops and UN police mounted a joint operation designed to cut the HDZ's financial lifeline, raiding and seizing monies held in the

Hercegovacka bank in the capital, Sarajevo, believed to be channelling funds for the HDZ from Croatia. One account alone was said to contain nearly \$30m originating from the Croatian capital, Zagreb.

The Croat nationalists responded with violent demonstrations in Sarajevo, Mostar, Grude and other towns. In total, 21 S-For troops were injured, staff from various international organisations were beaten and their vehicles set ablaze while pro-separatist local police watched.

Some employees of Bosnia's UN High Representative Wolfgang Petritsch, who oversees the Western imposed government structures, were held hostage.

Describing the incidents in Grude at a press conference the next day, Petritsch claimed that "gunmen took several federation and international personnel hostage in the bank... One [Western bank] investigator was taken outside and threatened with execution." The man was rescued by the intervention of a Croat Franciscan priest, he added.

Petritsch rejected dialogue with the Croatian separatists and said that leaders of the riot would be identified and prosecuted. "Neither I nor (NATO) will tolerate mob rule," he warned. US Ambassador Thomas Miller echoed this hardline stance, denouncing the HDZ for using "political power to cover its criminal activities, which are extensive."

That same day, Dutch NATO forces moved to secure the arsenals in the barracks seized by the Bosnian Croats in Vitez and Busovaca. The HDZ responded with demonstrations in Mostar to commemorate the ninth anniversary of the founding of wartime Croat militia, at which calls were made by former army generals for Croats remaining in government jobs to resign and for foreign administrators to leave Bosnia.

There are clear divisions within American ruling circles over how to respond to the escalating crisis in the Balkans, which their own support for the ethnic partition of the old Federal Republic of Yugoslavia has engendered.

The Bush administration has given clear signals of its desire to pull out of its present military commitments, or at the very least to cut them to the bone, and leave the policing of the Balkans to the European powers. The US has officially announced its intention to withdraw 900 personnel from Bosnia, along with 16 Apache gunship helicopters, tanks and armoured

vehicles, to be followed by all but 1,000 of its forces by 2003.

In an op-ed piece in the April 8 edition of the *New York Times*, Richard Holbrooke, former US ambassador to the United Nations and a key architect of the Dayton Accord, warned against such a move.

"If the United States does not lead events, it will be led by them," he wrote. "Recent actions by Macedonian Albanians and Bosnian Croats are, in part, reactions to a new administration perceived as more passive in the Balkans. This perception is inspiring separatists to try to push back the gains of the past five years. A fifth Balkan war has thus begun in Macedonia, and Washington faces challenges as well in Bosnia, Montenegro and Kosovo."

On the situation in Bosnia Holbrooke continued, "If the Croats succeed, Dayton will be effectively dead and Bosnia substantially wounded. The United States must lead a vigorous international effort against these criminal elements, arresting them and using force if necessary... In the end, the key question is whether the Balkans matter enough to justify such risks and costs. My answer is simple: They do matter that much, because European stability remains a basic American national security interest which did not end with the end of the cold war."



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