

# Macedonia "on the brink of the abyss"

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12 May 2001

Talks aimed at establishing a national unity government in Macedonia have stalled, with ethnic-Albanian representatives insisting on a complete ceasefire in the ongoing civil war before joining the present ruling coalition.

The Party for Democratic Prosperity (PDP), the country's largest ethnic Albanian party, has refused to join any government until the Macedonian army stops its offensive against National Liberation Army (NLA) fighters presently occupying several villages. NLA leader Commander Sololi said, "any government formed without the participation of the NLA will only let more blood get spilled."

Arben Xhaferi, leader of the smaller DPA (Democratic Party of Albanians) threatened to walk out of the existing coalition if demands for greater recognition of ethnic Albanian rights were not met. If the fighting continues, relations with the country's Albanian minority, who presently comprise some 30 percent of the population, are in danger of spiralling out of control plunging the country into the sort of fratricidal bloodletting witnessed earlier in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

The crisis in Macedonia follows the outbreak of fighting in February in the Presevo Valley, an area with a large Albanian minority inside southern Serbia bordering Kosovo. The Liberation Army of Presevo, Medvedja and Bujanovac (UCPMB), largely made up of members of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), clashed with NATO troops patrolling the area under the terms of the 1999 peace agreement to end the bombing of Yugoslavia. The UCPMB takes its name from three predominantly ethnic Albanian towns that the insurgents want incorporated within Kosovo, as part of a drive to secure formal independence for the whole province and its eventual merger with a Greater Albania.

In March, the NLA—which shares the same Albanian initials as the KLA—began skirmishes on the outskirts of Tetovo, Macedonia's second city, some 40 miles from the Kosovo-Macedonia border. After being forced to withdraw its forces from around the city, the NLA has engaged in a number of battles for control over several of the country's mainly ethnic Albanian villages.

The European powers have taken the initiative to try and

secure a peaceful resolution to the crisis in Macedonia, which could easily ignite a wider Balkan conflict bringing in neighbouring Greece. A *Reuters* newswire reports Britain being "gravely concerned" with the delays in establishing the national unity government. A Foreign Office spokesman is quoted saying, "Every passing day increases the risk of deepening divisions between Macedonia's different ethnic communities."

The European powers have expressed reluctance to commit more ground troops to the area, preferring to rely on the Macedonian army to suppress the NLA while seeking to engage the ethnic Albanian parties in a wider government role. A visit from European Union High Representative Javier Solana, the EU's senior security official, accompanied by NATO secretary-general George Robertson to the Macedonian capital Skopje, this week was aimed at putting pressure on the government to withdraw its earlier threat to declare a state of war. Such a move could scupper the "stabilisation and association agreement" the EU signed with Macedonia last month, and which represents the first step to EU membership.

On Monday, Robertson warned that Macedonia was "on the brink of the abyss," and described NLA fighters as "a bunch of murderous thugs whose objective is to destroy a democratic Macedonia". He committed NATO to providing wider military support for the Macedonian government's operations against the rebels, and said he would urge member states to increase bi-lateral military aid and training. He also promised greater intelligence sharing.

In the course of the visit, the Commander of the NATO South Wing Admiral James Ellis met with chief of the Macedonian Army General Staff General Jovan Andreevski, to find a way "for better coordination of the activities of the two sides."

While publicly expressing their support for the government and its efforts to combat the NLA insurgents, Robertson and Solana were reported to be urging Georgievski not to alienate the country's Albanian minority, and pressing him to extend his coalition to include the main Slav and ethnic Albanian opposition parties.

Prime Minister Georgievski received a warm welcome in

the US last week, where he met with President Bush and senior administration officials including Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and Secretary of State Colin Powell. Washington agreed to provide more than \$50m in economic and military aid, on top of last month's pledge to pay \$5.5m for police training and community self-help programmes for Albanian minority.

After meeting with Georgievski, Powell told the press, "I once again had the opportunity to express solidarity with Macedonia, the United States' total commitment to territorial integrity of Macedonia..."

The US joined with Europe in pressing the Macedonian government to reach an accommodation with the ethnic Albanian parties, hoping in this way to isolate the NLA fighters. Georgievski subsequently withdrew his call made last weekend for parliament to discuss putting the country on a war footing, which would have required a two-thirds majority and grant the Prime Minister wide-ranging powers to rule by decree. The main opposition Slav party, the Social Democratic Union (SDSM), agreed Wednesday to enter the government alongside the two main ruling Slav parties VMRO-DPME, the DPA and the Liberal Party.

With the traditionally more bellicose SDSM on board, the government stepped up its bombardment of NLA positions, launching one of the heaviest attacks since fighting began. Helicopter gunships were deployed, making several sorties over the villages of Vaksince and Slutcane, supported by heavy mortar and tank fire. According to Colonel Blagohe Markovski, "the operation will continue until the terrorists are finally eliminated."

The crisis in Macedonia has intensified since eight members of the security forces were killed by NLA guerrillas in an ambush near Vejce, a village 12 miles north of Tetovo and close to the Kosovo border on April 29. It was the most serious single incident since fighting first erupted in February around the city of Tetovo. Press reports said the bodies had been deliberately mutilated.

One unnamed Western diplomat was quoted saying, "They [the NLA] want an over-reaction—they want a Racak", referring to the alleged massacre of ethnic Albanians in Kosovo that was used as a pretext for committing NATO to a bombing campaign against Serbia.

The Vejce ambush may well have been deliberately aimed at destabilising the ongoing talks between the Georgievski government and representatives of the ethnic Albanian parties. A reaction was not long in coming. Shortly after the funeral of the eight Macedonian army and police force members was held last week, rioting broke out in the southern city of Bitola. According to press reports, hundreds of Macedonians went on the rampage in the ethnically mixed city, destroying property and looting shops owned by

Albanians.

Some press reports blamed the looting on ultra-nationalist Macedonian paramilitary organisations. DPA leader Arben Xhaferri compared the destruction and looting with the Nazis' pogroms against the Jews, "It was Kristallnacht, like in 1938 when they attacked Jewish shops. It's the same game."

The emergence of the NLA inside Macedonia is a bitter product of the West's policy in neighbouring Kosovo. The NATO powers cynically utilised the grievances of the ethnic Albanian Kosovars in their war against the Belgrade regime of Slobodan Milosevic. Washington and the EU feted the KLA leaders such as Hashim Thaci, who called for Kosovo to gain independence from Serbia.

A report in specialist defence publication *Jane's Security* warns that the ethnic Albanian guerrillas comprising the now supposedly disbanded KLA anticipated that since "they would never be granted full independence—or eventual union with their ethnic Albanian kin in Macedonia—the KLA stockpiled the bulk of its weaponry across the border in Albanian-speaking regions of western Macedonia, waiting for an opportunity to destabilise the only former Yugoslav republic to have ceded from Tito's federation without bloodshed."

According to the Institute for War & Peace Reporting (IWPR), many of the KLA founders belonged to the Popular Movement for Kosovo (LPK), "a tiny party, which was instrumental in setting up the KLA. Many LPK people, including Fazli Veliu, its former leader were, however, not Kosovars but Macedonian Albanians.

The IPWR explain that when the war in Kosovo ended, some of the Macedonian Albanians opted to follow a political career in Kosovo. However, "Some did not. They include Ali Ahmeti, the political leader of the NLA who is also Fazil Veliu's nephew. This group found themselves the losers of Kosovo politics and unable to return home. For a long time they agitated to begin a conflict in Macedonia but were restrained by their Kosovar colleagues who believed that any attempt to open a Macedonian front would be disastrous." No such restraint is being attempted today. Having called forth the KLA to secure its own interests in the Balkans, the West has awakened the ghost of a Greater Albania and the possibility of a yet wider Balkan war.



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