

Macedonia: US troops intervene to save Albanian separatists

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US forces took unilateral action on Monday to evacuate hundreds of Albanian separatist guerrillas from outside the Macedonian capital Skopje. A force of 81 American soldiers and 16 armed Humvee military vehicles escorted 20 busloads of troops belonging to the National Liberation Army (NLA), the Albanian separatist force in Macedonia, from the village of Aracinovo on the outskirts of Skopje.

The evacuation followed two weeks of heavy fighting in Aracinovo, a flashpoint in the widening conflict between Albanian insurgents and the government. Government forces were on the point of routing the separatists when the US military stepped in. Four NATO trucks helped transport the separatists' weapons, which were later returned to the guerrillas.

US Pentagon spokesman Admiral Craig Quigley said General Joseph Ralston, the top NATO commander who commands all American forces in Europe, took the decision to use US troops to provide an escort for the retreating NLA forces. White House spokesman Ari Fleischer confirmed that the action had been sanctioned at the highest level of authority. President Bush, his national security adviser Condoleeza Rice and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld had all been consulted on the decision to deploy US troops.

Washington's decision to rescue the NLA forces provoked widespread anger in Macedonia. On Monday night, a crowd of nearly 10,000 gathered before the parliament in Skopje, where many shouted "Death to all Albanians... The only good Albanian is a dead Albanian." They also chanted anti-NATO slogans and some burned pictures of European Union security head Javier Solana, who sanctioned the US action after the fact.

America's actions have no justification within NATO's official remit, which is to aid the Macedonian government in bringing the ethnic Albanian insurgency under control, while negotiating a cease-fire between the two sides in the

conflict. Only a week ago, NATO issued a statement saying, "The Alliance is prepared to provide assistance [to Macedonia], on condition that the political dialogue between the different parties has *a successful outcome* and a cease-fire is implemented. At this moment, and this moment only, will NATO send troops with *strong and precise rules of engagement*, to collect weapons from the ethnic Albanian extremists." [Emphasis in the original text.]

Instead of working towards disarming the "Albanian extremists", the US intervened to save the NLA guerrillas, who were deposited at another village some 11 miles further north. Within hours they began launching fresh attacks on Skopje.

The decision to rescue the NLA has utterly exposed Washington's pretence that its intervention in the Balkans is motivated by concern either for the sovereignty of the various states that emerged out of the break-up of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, or the fate of elected governments.

The Bush administration has moved to protect the NLA, the Macedonian sister organisation of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), because it wants to continue using the separatist guerrilla army as its cat's paw in the Balkans.

In the latter half of the 1990s, the US provided the KLA with funds and CIA assistance in its campaign of assassinating Serb policemen and intimidating Serb civilians, as part of a broader strategy of destabilising Serbia and securing American hegemony over the region. Washington, with the aid of the KLA, was playing the dangerous and cynical game of exploiting the justified grievances of Albanian Kosovars against the Serb nationalist regime in Belgrade to encourage communalist conflict and civil war.

At the Rambouillet peace talks in early 1999 the US brought the KLA delegates forward and presented them as

the legitimate representatives of the Albanian Kosovar population. In the guise of a peace proposal, Washington handed Serbia an ultimatum that it could not accept because it allowed Western military forces unrestricted access to Serbian territory and negated the country's sovereignty.

In the US-NATO air war against Serbia that followed, the American and European military formed a de facto alliance with the KLA. Following the war, Kosovo was established as little more than a Western protectorate administered by the KLA.

The KLA is not now, and never was, a genuine liberation force. It has long had ties not only with US and European intelligence agencies, but also with mafia gangs involved in drug running and other criminal activities. Once in power in Kosovo, the KLA established a reign of terror, forcing non-Albanians such as Serbs and Roma to flee, and violently repressing its Albanian political opponents.

The KLA became so unpopular with Kosovar Albanians that it was heavily defeated in last November's elections. But this did not bring an end to its activities. KLA forces, under the pseudonym of the Liberation Army of Presevo, Medvedja and Bujanovic, carried out excursions over the border into southern Serbia, which also has a large ethnic Albanian population. This was done with the tacit support of the US, whose troops patrol the border.

The successful deposition of Serb President Slobodan Milosevic last October and the installation of the pro-Western government of President Vojislav Kostunica led to a shift in official NATO policy towards the Albanian separatists.

Especially after the KLA extended their operations into neighbouring Macedonia in January/February this year, its expansionist aims, as well as its criminal activities, were increasingly viewed—particularly by Europe—as a threat to the stability of the Balkan region. During five months of fighting in Macedonia, 60,000 ethnic Albanians have been turned into refugees, many having fled to Kosovo, and up to 35,000 Macedonian Slavs have been displaced, many of whom now live in refugee camps in Skopje.

European officials have of late taken to denouncing as terrorists the same KLA forces they depicted as freedom fighters when NATO was seeking to manipulate international public opinion and whip up support for war against Serbia. NATO Secretary General George Robertson recently decried the KLA as "murderers in the hills", saying peace could only be negotiated with the "democratic" representatives of the ethnic Albanians.

In May US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and Secretary of State Colin Powell met with Macedonia's Prime Minister Georgievski in Washington, with Powell proclaiming "the United State's total commitment to the territorial integrity of Macedonia".

However, when the survival of the KLA's arm in Macedonia, the NLA, was threatened, the US came to its rescue. Sponsoring the KLA and NLA provides the US with a means of continuing to pressure Serbia and keep the Kostunica regime in line. Washington also views its proxy Albanian force as a means of maintaining its dominant role in Balkan affairs, at the expense of its European rivals.

The European Union has sought to put a brave face on a bad situation by stressing the role of its security chief Solana in brokering the NLA withdrawal from Aracinovo. Nevertheless, the European powers were clearly sidelined by the US move. Germany's *Die Welt* railed bitterly against the latest turn of events, stating bluntly that Solana's actions in brokering the rescue "was possibly his last move, which will now throw Macedonia into anarchy and civil war".

There are also sections of the American political establishment that view Western manoeuvres with the KLA and its Macedonian offshoot to be reckless and dangerous. *Time* magazine noted, "By essentially elevating the status of the NLA to that of a legitimate protagonist in Macedonia's future, NATO and the European Union may have already effectively conceded the carving up of Macedonia on ethnic lines."

Once again, military force combined with political intrigue of the basest character is being utilised to assert the predatory interests of competing imperialist powers, threatening a wider conflagration in the Balkans.



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