

Kosovo threatens to ignite fresh Balkan conflict

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The Kosovo Provisional Assembly has passed a declaration challenging the Border Delineation Agreement signed in February 2001 and establishing an internationally recognised border between Yugoslavia and the Republic of Macedonia. This agreement came after years of negotiations between the governments in Belgrade and Skopje.

Ethnic Albanian paramilitaries, however, never recognised the February agreement and instigated a violent campaign against the Macedonian army and border police. The five-month conflict left hundreds of ethnic Albanians and Macedonians dead and tens of thousands homeless.

The paramilitaries involved were members of the National Liberation Army (NLA), an off-shot of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA). The NLA and another splinter group, the ANA, have regularly flouted a cease fire signed last August. The resolution passed by the government in Pristina could prompt the fighting to flare up into full-scale war.

This development has gone largely unreported in the Western mass media because it has been instigated by the KLA, which has functioned, even before NATO's 1999 war against Serbia, as a puppet of the United States.

NATO and UN representatives in Kosovo have denied that the KLA has exported its war to the neighbouring Republic of Macedonia to further its goal of establishing a Greater Kosovo. The declaration of the Kosovo Provisional Assembly would suggest otherwise.

The establishment of the Kosovo Provisional Assembly and the elections last November were hailed as a cornerstone for future Balkan stability and a victory for political moderation. The parameters of the new governing body were set down by the United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1244. This allowed for greater autonomy within the boundaries of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY). Kosovo remained a Western protectorate with the UN having the last word on the final status of the province. But ethnic Albanian parties guaranteed a majority in the governing body have instead contrived to use the assembly as a vehicle to aggressively assert their claim for independent statehood.

The assembly passed a declaration on May 23, refusing to recognise the border with Macedonia. Prime Minister Bajram Rexhepi, a member of the Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK), presented the motion. The PDK is the main political successor to the KLA, headed by former commander Hashim Thaci.

Rexhepi had indicated that he would present the resolution as far back as March. In a statement read to Radio 21 on March 6, following his first meeting with KFOR Commander General Valentine Marselleu, Prime Minister Rexhepi said, "Kosovo institutions do not recognise the agreement for the border line between Skopje and Belgrade, because with this deal Kosovo lost some 2,500 hectares (6,100 acres) of its territory to Macedonia."

The Kosovo PM stated that the resolution would be forwarded to the United Nations Security Council. This brought an immediate response from Macedonian Minister of Foreign Affairs Slobodan Cashule who warned, "One-sided revision of the border, without using the agreement

mechanism is a declaration of war, which destroys the European foundation and the basic principle of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) for inviolability of borders."

The vote was taken in an assembly dominated entirely by ethnic Albanian political representatives. Serb legislators walked out of the proceedings in protest, leaving the resolution to be passed with 85 votes for and none against. President Ibrahim Rugova and his Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK), considered a more moderate figure in the West, lent their support. All three parties are unanimous in rejecting the integrity of the FRY and its jurisdiction over the border with the Republic of Macedonia.

United Nations Special Representative (UNSR) Michael Steiner had attempted to prevent the motion from being presented. He immediately exercised the power of veto, declaring the resolution "null and void". Criticising the assembly, he stated: "If you want us to act and if you recognise that for us to act we need the support of the international community then you don't antagonise the international community. Today the assembly did exactly that.

"Kosovo is not an island. Kosovo needs this international support.... If we want to progress we must follow the rules." Steiner's somewhat mild rebuke was echoed by the UN Security Council and US State Department and by European Foreign Policy chief, Javier Solana, who said the resolution "will only undermine the legitimacy of the Kosovo Assembly."

The issue in dispute goes far beyond some 2,500 hectares of land. On May 30, a PDK Assembly member told the Albanian language TV station, TV ERA, in Skopje: "Kodra Fura is ours and Kosovo will return this piece of its territory."

Kodra Fura is a checkpoint of the Macedonian army. It is situated in a mountainous area, the highest peak north of Skopje. It commands a clear view of smuggling routes connecting Macedonia, Kosovo and parts of southern Serbia. Control of this vantage point would be critical in establishing a Greater Kosovo—a goal that the KLA and its offshoots in the Presevo valley and in northwest Macedonia have worked towards ever since NATO entered Kosovo. It is located only two kilometres from the Macedonian watchtower "Straza" at Tanustevci. It was here that the violent campaign by the NLA was initiated when a police station was destroyed in early 2001.

The KLA launched incursions to aid its sister organisation from the village of Debalde, only 100 metres over the Kosovo border. Following the assembly's declaration and attempts by the Macedonian army to close the border, there have been several attacks from the Kosovo side. The Straza was recently attacked twice with mortars and automatic weaponry.

Despite this, NATO forces within Macedonia have played down the security threat. Speaking after one particular incident, the German general and commander of NATO's "Operation Amber Fox" stated: "There might have been an incident, but clearly not in the dimension and not in the kind mentioned."

This is a blasé attitude indeed, given that the pretext for NATO

engagement in the Republic of Macedonia is to disarm the ethnic Albanian paramilitaries, and one that is not matched by the US State Department, which issued a travel warning to deter US citizens from travelling to Macedonia. The warning issued on May 21 states, “The situation remains unsettled and potentially dangerous.” It comments on the bombings in Skopje and Tetovo during August 2001, which were directed against civilians as well as government and military targets, whilst remaining silent on the perpetrators of these acts—NATO’s ally in the war against Yugoslavia.

In the run-up to last November’s election, the PDK made it abundantly clear that it would not accept the limitations imposed on the Provincial Assembly by the UN and would make it unworkable. That the PDK is able to conduct its antics from such elevated heights within the new government owes much to the favoritism shown to it by the US. The US has worked to insure that the KLA remains a force in the land long after it was officially disbanded. The PDK has trailed well behind the LDK in elections held in the province since it became a Western protectorate. It has formed a bloc with Alliance for the Future of Kosovo (AAK), led by another former KLA commander, Ramush Haradinaj.

Even so, their combined vote in elections last November was around 33 percent, compared to the LDK’s 46 percent.

While the LDK was the outright winner, it lacked a parliamentary majority and was forced into a power sharing arrangement with the two KLA parties.

The number of ministerial posts allocated to the PDK and AAK was disproportionate to their share of the vote. Together they occupy the same number of posts as the LDK—four—and the PDK also took the post of prime minister. The agreement was reached in February, following negotiations between the three ethnic Albanian parties and the US official for Kosovo, John Menzies.

The Provisional Assembly was clearly emboldened to make its latest move after provocative comments by US Brigadier General Keith Huber, KFOR Commander of the Multinational Brigade East. At a press conference in February, the American general described the border agreement between Skopje and Belgrade as “illegal” and pledged to send in US troops on the pretext of securing land he claimed had been taken from ethnic Albanian farmers in Kosovo. Obviously the displacement of poor farmers was not an issue when the US seized some 1,000 acres in southern Kosovo to build its sprawling military complex, Camp Bondsteel.

Other NATO representatives distanced themselves from Huber’s comments. NATO Ambassador to Macedonia Klaus Völlers stated: “NATO fully respects the Border Delineation Agreement signed between Macedonia and Yugoslavia on February 23, 2001.” Following an official complaint made by the Macedonian government to NATO, however, it was made clear that no disciplinary action would be taken against Huber.

Evidence is also emerging about covert support given by the US to the NLA in last year’s fighting in the Republic of Macedonia. The Clingendael Institute, a Dutch military analysis firm, has passed on pertinent information from a European intelligence report to Dutch National Radio. The allegations of US support for ethnic Albanian paramilitaries in Macedonia centre on last year’s three-day battle in Aracino. Suspicions were aroused at the time when, as the Macedonian army was on the verge of routing the NLA, the US intervened to evacuate the heavily armed NLA forces, which were taken by army buses to the US military complex, Camp Bondsteel. NATO claimed at the time that this measure was required, in order to prevent a victory for the Albanian paramilitaries and to mediate a settlement.

But the German newspaper, *Hamburger Abendblatt*, reported that among the evacuated NLA forces were 17 advisers from Military Professional Resources Incorporated (MPRI), a private military company that operates under contract for the Pentagon and is composed of former

US army chiefs. The MPRI was used to train and equip the Croatian army before the offensive in the Krajina region in 1995. “Operation Storm” gave rise to the single largest act of ethnic cleansing since the recent conflicts began.

The Dutch report confirms this US involvement, quoting the German reporter who first exposed this. The Macedonians were able to identify one MPRI man as he waved his US passport in a bid to obtain diplomatic immunity. The European intelligence report states that this person had been involved in training Bosnian fighters.

The Dutch report also casts doubts over the proficiency of Operation “Essential Harvest”, in which NATO troops were initially deployed in the Republic of Macedonia for 30 days to oversee the disarming of the NLA. It was stated at the time that NATO troops would only be involved in a voluntary collection of arms and would not conduct any searches for any weaponry suspected of being withheld.

NATO Secretary-General George Robertson described the operation as a “resounding success.” However, the Dutch report claims that such statements were made for public consumption and were not believed internally. Mainly obsolete weaponry was being handed in and less than four percent of it functioned. This became so widely known that the director of the national history museum in Macedonia published a request for NATO to donate some of the equipment to the museum.

Jane’s Defence Weekly estimates that the NLA possessed some 6,000 to 8,000 assault rifles alone; not the figure of 3,300 agreed between the paramilitaries and NATO.

The Dutch are due to take over the German command of NATO’s “Operation Amber Fox” in the Republic of Macedonia. This is an extension of NATO’s original mandate on the pretext of overseeing the return of displaced ethnic Albanians and ethnic Macedonians. According to figures compiled last September by the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR), a total of 74,500 persons were displaced—60 percent of these ethnic Macedonians—with another 59,000 refugees outside the country—43,000 of these in Kosovo. The UNHCR reported that while a greater number of ethnic Albanians had returned, 22,000 ethnic Macedonians remain homeless, fearful of returning to NLA held territory.



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