

Kosovo: UN forces arrest former KLA commanders

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The United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) has arrested a number of former Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) commanders, sparking violent protests in the former Yugoslav province.

KFOR General Marcel Valentin said the arrests were linked to a campaign “to drive out extremism and organised crime” before parliamentary elections in neighbouring Macedonia.

More than 60 former KLA members have been arrested this year but it is charges recently laid against two of the most well known commanders—Rrustem ‘Remi’ Mustafa and Ramush Haradinaj (now leader of the Alliance for the Future of Kosova)—that has caused the most opposition.

A demonstration in Decani demanding “freedom for the freedom fighters” led to a riot in which 15 UNMIK police and KFOR soldiers and many demonstrators were injured. Decani municipality vice president Nazmi Selmanaj claimed, “The revolt of the people in Kosovo is growing everyday.”

The famous Albanian author Ismail Kadaré complained to the Kosovan paper *Bota Sot*: “What image do recent developments give to Kosovo when we know that three years ago the entire Kosovo population welcomed the international troops with flowers as liberators?”

Now however, the Western “liberators” feel the need to rein in and neutralise some of their former collaborators in the KLA. Particularly within European Union circles the KLA is regarded as the most pressing threat to regional stability. Former US special envoys to the Balkans, Richard Holbrooke and Christopher Hill have said they anticipate Greater Albanian nationalism to be more of a problem this decade than Greater Serbia nationalism was in the 1990s.

No Western politicians, of course, draw attention to their own role in cultivating separatism and encouraging the bloody break-up of Yugoslavia.

It was only three years ago, in 1999, that Western governments were portraying the KLA as a progressive liberation movement, fighting to protect ethnic Albanians from Serbian chauvinism and ethnic cleansing.

Although previously denounced by the CIA as a small gang of drug runners and terrorists, the KLA became a key ally of the US in its campaign to depose Federal Republic of Yugoslav (FRY) president Slobodan Milosevic.

Utilising the Milosevic regime’s depredations against ethnic minorities in the former Yugoslavia, the Western powers

encouraged the growth of separatist movements in the region as a means of justifying military intervention and establishing imperialist hegemony within the Balkans. By the end of NATO bombing, the KLA had been re-armed and trained allowing it to take control of all the municipalities in Kosovo.

Having largely succeeded in breaking Yugoslavia down into small, ethnically-based statelets, overseen by pliant pro-Western governments, continued separatist agitation has become highly problematic for the US and Europe.

In Kosovo, the activities of the KLA and its various spin-off organisations are threatening the stability of the entire region. Besides its ongoing offensive actions against Serbia and terrorist campaigns in neighbouring Macedonia, the KLA is seeking to establish its undisputed control over the huge network of smuggling, racketeering and money laundering operations that now proliferate in the Balkans.

According to Canada’s former ambassador to Yugoslavia James Bissett “Kosovo remains essentially a lawless society, completely intolerant of ethnic minorities and one of the most dangerous places on earth.” For a population of two million inhabitants there are “40,000 troops, 5,000 international police and 5,000 local police yet the UN and NATO have proven totally unable to prevent murder, assassination, rape, robbery and intimidation on a daily basis” according to Bissett in the June 22, 2002 edition of *Ottawa Citizen*.

On June 27 the UN itself released a report saying, “with more than half of Kosovo’s population living in poverty, the province faces several obstacles to further economic growth” (“Kosovo Human Development Report 2002: Building Bridges to a Better Future”).

Devastated by war and the wider world recession, Kosovo has a fragile economy dependent on international organisations as sources of employment. Since the September 11 terror attack in New York, non-governmental organisations have reduced their workforce from 40,000 to 15,000. They have relocated to Afghanistan.

The UN is also a major employer but Secretary General Kofi Annan warned UNMIK that a \$61 million budget reduction over the next 2 years “will necessitate the transfer of responsibility and authority to the provisional institutions earlier than planned.”

UNMIK considers the main provisional institution to be the Kosova Assembly whose establishment this year was the “last formal step towards the substantive autonomy promised in

Security Council Resolution 1244 and the final settlement of Kosovo's status that should follow."

It should be noted that Resolution 1244 also gave "the commitment of the international community to the sovereign and territorial integrity of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia." Currently an educational bus is touring the region sponsored by the European Union under the slogan "Serbia and Montenegro with Kosova".

But for the ethnic Albanian parties that campaigned in elections for the Kosova Assembly last November, "substantive autonomy" means independence.

After lengthy negotiations following the elections, a power sharing deal was struck between the largest party, Ibrahim Rugova's Democratic League of Kosova, and the KLA successor parties; the Democratic Party of Kosova (PDK) of former KLA leader Hashim Thaci and Ramush Haradinaj's Alliance for the Future of Kosova (AAK). Rugova is now president of the assembly and PDK member Bajram Rexhepi is prime minister.

One of the first acts of the Assembly was to pass a declaration challenging the Macedonia border with Kosovo but UNMIK chief Michael Steiner ruled the declaration null and void. Steiner declared it would be a long time before the process of determining Kosovo's future status was started. He repeated "our message is: standards before status."

At the end of July Steiner reassured the UN Security Council that the security situation in Kosovo had "improved" and that US KFOR commanders had told their troops they no longer needed flak jackets or helmets.

Within hours a rocket grenade attack destroyed four houses in the predominantly Serb village of Kllolot wounding two US KFOR soldiers. Another grenade exploded in a restaurant in Pec/Peje wounding eight people including Tahir Zemaq, a former KLA commander now close to Rugova. Haradinaj was blamed for the explosion.

The violence led to the convening of an emergency meeting between Steiner, Eberhard Busek, EU special coordinator for the Balkans Stability Pact, High representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina Paddy Ashdown and High representative for Macedonia Alain LeRoi.

Within days of their discussions Mustafa was arrested and Haradinaj indicted. They are amongst six former KLA members who are to face a Kosovo based UN court on war crimes charges.

Mustafa has been charged with involvement in the torture and murder of at least five people in 1999. Mustafa was commander of the most important KLA war zone, the Llap zone that included the Kosovan capital Prishtina and the region bordering Serbia. He opposed the signing of the Rambouillet agreement—the document used by NATO to justify its bombing of Yugoslavia—and was closely associated with Adem Demaci who resigned as the KLA's chief representative when it was clear that immediate independence for Kosovo would not be forthcoming. Mustafa is thought to have been involved with the insurgency in Macedonia last year that almost brought the country to civil war.

Haradinaj has been indicted but not arrested for "endangering the safety of others". It is believed that in 1999, prior to NATO's arrival in Kosovo, Haradinaj ordered the killing of four members

of the rival mafia Musaj clan who belonged to the Armed Forces of the Republic of Kosovo guerillas. Haradinaj was injured when the family went to collect the corpses but was whisked off to the US base Bondsteel and then to an American hospital in Germany for treatment. US officials are said to have cleaned up the crime scene.

According to Britain's *Observer* newspaper, September 19, 2000, Haradinaj was "the key US military and intelligence asset in Kosovo during the civil war and NATO bombing campaign that followed." British officials characterised him as a psychopath who is said to be responsible for killing six teenagers at the Panda Café in Pec/Peje and murdering and disposing of 40 civilians in the Radonjic Lake canal in 1999. Nevertheless he was valued as "one of the few former commanders who can deliver": a reference to his crucial role in the smooth transformation of the KLA into the Kosova Protection Force, ostensibly a civil defence organisation of 3,000 active troops and 2,000 reservists. Haradinaj acted as right hand man to KPC boss Agim Ceku but was dismissed after a financial scandal.

The relatively minor shooting charge against Haradinaj is probably meant as a warning by his American handlers to him and other Kosova Albanian extremists to rein in their activities. Haradinaj is believed to control the Albanian National Army separatists in Macedonia who opposed the ceasefire last year.

Nonetheless, the charges against Mustafa and Haradinaj have led to renewed calls by Albanian nationalist politicians for early Kosovan independence. President Rugova called for the "early recognition of Kosovan independence [which] would appease Kosova and the region." Prime Minister Rexhepi called the arrests "politically motivated" and the arrested men "political prisoners."

Thaci stated that "the PDK fully supports UNMIK and Kosovo institutions in their fight against organised crime but it cannot agree that in the name of this fight is criminalised the war for freedom fought by the KLA that is the greatest value ever for the people of Kosovo". The arrests, he added "are being conducted to impede the advancement of the process that will lead Kosova to independence" and put in jeopardy "the good co-operation between the Kosovars and the West especially the US Office."

The arrest of KLA members has also been criticised by Veton Surroi publisher of the paper *Koha Ditore* who has hitherto been the most ardent supporter of Western intervention. He was promoted as an independent Kosovan Albanian participant at the Rambouillet talks and has appeared as a witness for the prosecution in the Milosevic trial at The Hague. He acknowledged the "public notoriety surrounding the former KLA as a smuggling enterprise" but wondered why UNMIK officials had tolerated it until now. Why, he continued had the KLA been targeted when there is "wide corruption in municipal administration, the misuse of public enterprises by their owners and international sponsors as means for getting rich?"



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