

## **Albanian Fighters on the Warpath**

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Albanians fighters are again preparing for battle after apparently running out of patience with the Macedonian government

After several weeks of lying low in their villages, there are increasing signs that Albanian fighters are ready to take up arms again.

Frustrated by the slow pace of cross-party talks on improving their community's civil rights, the National Liberation Army, NLA, it seems, is preparing for a further round of conflict.

Tensions between the NLA and the authorities have been escalating over the past week, culminating with Albanian fighters in the Kumanovo area proclaiming an autonomous territory.

At the weekend, Albanian fighters killed eight Macedonian troops close to the border with Kosovo, in the worst outbreak of violence since the battles around Tetovo in March.

In an interview with Newsweek magazine, published Monday, a senior NLA representative, Commander Sokoli, said the group is organising three brigades, comprising around 18,000 men, in readiness for a new campaign against the security forces. The brigades, he said, would be based in different parts of the country and could be operational within 24 hours.

This comes more than a week after Hysni Shairi, a member of the Democratic Party of Albanians, DPA, who defected to the NLA, told the weekly Lobi that Albanians should take up arms and "settle their problems with a rifle".

"Our army is deployed in all Albanian-populated areas and is ready at any moment to respond to the Macedonian military and police forces, " he said.

In a move likely to boost the NLA' s morale, a former commander of the Kosovo Liberation Army, KLA, Xhavit Hasani, widely regarded as a war hero by his ethnic kin, is reported to have joined Albanian fighters in Macedonia.

These developments are clearly worrying the Macedonian authorities who had claimed last month that security force operations had effectively broken the back of the NLA.

Prior to the weekend clash on the Kosovo border, some Skopje officials had been warning that the Albanian fighters appeared to be regrouping in the border areas but insisted that the security situation was under control.

The NLA says its renewed activity is linked to their frustration with the slow pace of talks on improvements of Albanian rights. The government has so far rejected the community's demands for their status in the constitution to be elevated from minority to nation.

They claim to have been further angered by evidence that the police force has allegedly been harassing innocent Albanians, in operations against NLA targets.

"These provocations cannot be endured and I don't know how long the calm will last if they continue, " said the NLA's political leader Ali Ahmeti.

Tensions were further fuelled Tuesday, after Macedonian civilians attacked Albanian property in Bitola following the funeral of four policemen killed in the weekend border clash.

After the fighting in March, many NLA fighters cast off their combat fatigues, buried their weapons in arms dumps, and headed back to their villages. In interviews with IWPR, some of them now say they are ready to take up arms again because, they say, their patience with the authorities is rapidly running out.

"If there is no solution to our problems then we will wear uniforms again," said one fighter. "I have visited many countries, I know what freedom means - here I've been faced with injustice at every stage of my life.

"We had thought that once Macedonia shook off Serbian rule, the life of Albanians here would improve. That didn't happen. So we were forced to take another road. When your dignity is violated, there is no other choice but to fight."

Another young combatant denied claims that the security forces' offensive in March had inflicted a serious blow on the NLA. "The NLA withdrew only temporarily, not because of the Macedonian offensive but as a result of international criticism. We don't like to upset international opinion.

"The army's offensive showed that it was powerless in the face of guerrilla resistance. We could have destroyed army and police units - but it seems our command didn't want that. We waited for the order but it never came."

Another NLA fighter claimed the international community was not putting enough pressure on the authorities to reach a settlement with his community's representatives.

And he warned that there won't be very much progress if European diplomats continue to insist that Albanians in Macedonia are better off than their brothers were under Milosevic.

"The diplomats do not want war in Europe, " he said. "That is good. However, it's a mistake to tell us that because we are enjoying more freedom than those who were enslaved, we have therefore nothing to complain about."

The fighters say that if the peace talks break down, they will have no reservations about returning to their armed struggle. "I went to war convinced I would die," said one. " First I defeated the greatest enemy of all - fear. We are sworn to fight whenever asked to do so."

**Location:** Macedonia  
Kosovo

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