

## **Albanians Celebrate KLA Transformation as Step to Independence**

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After months of protracted negotiations, the KLA has finally been transformed into a trouble-shooting civilian force. But as Daut Dauti reports, the move has enraged Serbia, which sees the move as the legalisation of a separatist army.

Albanian leaders have hailed the formal transformation of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) into a civilian security force as a major step towards the independence of Kosovo.

The leader of the Democratic League of Kosovo, Ibrahim Rugova, described the inauguration of the Kosovo Protection Corps (TMK) at a ceremony in Pristina last week as an "important and historic day " for the region.

"Forming the TMK means forming an important institution," he said in an interview with Bota Sot, a Kosovo daily. "Together with other institutions we are building, we will build Kosovo," he added.

TMK commander General Major Rrustem Mustafa, said the transformation of the KLA into a civilian force, numbering 3,000 troops with 2,000 reserves, "was the first step towards the reconstruction and development of Kosovo as an independent state."

The inauguration, however, has been condemned by the Belgrade press as the legalisation of the KLA, which they regard as terrorist force intent on turning Kosovo into an independent state.

The demilitarisation of the KLA was considered by many to be one of the most difficult tasks facing the United Nation Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK), and the International Protection Force (KFOR). The first step in the KLA's evolution into a peacetime force, which will be used to intervene in trouble spots, began last September. The process has been fraught with controversy.

The UN initially saw the TMK merely as a civil defence force, while KLA leaders insisted that it become the region's army. Disarming KLA fighters was also extremely difficult and new recruits to the TMK have been criticised for a lack of discipline.

Differences between Albanian leaders and the international community over the TMK were still evident in negotiations leading up to last Friday's official launch of the force.

The meeting began with KLA generals insisting on retaining their military rank in the new set-up. TMK General Agim Ceku is reported to have considered resigning in protest at the international community's refusal to accept Albanian demands. A compromise deal was eventually achieved after hours of heated discussion.

Details of the compromise remain unclear, but the Albanian language daily Koha Ditore reported that former KLA fighters had dropped their demands, saying they "agreed to concentrate on rebuilding Kosovo rather than wasting time with military ranks."

Forty-three former KLA fighters were sworn in as members of the TMK at its inaugural ceremony, attended

by KFOR commander General Klaus Reinhardt and UNMIK's chief administrator, Bernard Kouchner.

"You have fought against repression and you won - nobody can take this from you, " Reinhardt is reported to have told the gathering. "It is one thing when you protect your country - another thing when you have to rebuild it," Reinhardt added.

Kouchner is quoted as saying, "Nobody can describe the bitter years of oppression, sacrifices and family losses better than you who were in the mountains."

The establishment of the TMK has been bitterly criticised by Serbia. The independent Belgrade newspaper Glas Javnosti said the move was just another confirmation of the "unhidden intentions" of part of the international community to give Serbian land to ethnic Albanians.

"Even those who had little confidence in the peacekeepers are now aware that they had not arrived in Kosovo to establish peace, but to occupy a part of Serbia with the help of Albanian extremists," the paper said.

"They continue to support the extremists, just as they did before the war and during the bombardment."

The Yugoslav official news agency, Tanjug, claimed that Hashim Thaci, the leader of the People's Democratic Party of Kosovo and former leader of the KLA, told the inauguration that the corps' purpose was to secure the territory and borders of Kosovo.

"In other words, " said Tanjug, "the idea is for it to set itself up as a military force in charge of security in the province, although this is at odds with the positions of the UN Security Council and the Group of Eight industrialised states and Russia."

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