

Albanians Flee Southern Serbia

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Police terror in southern Serbia has forced thousands of Albanians to seek refuge in Kosovo.

Bujanovac resembles a ghost town. The streets are deserted. In restaurants people speak in muffled tones.

"Once it gets dark, the place is lifeless," says local Albanian Mipat Aziz, as a Serbian special police patrol passes by.

What everyone in the south of Serbia feared has begun. Following the disbandment of the KLA, a new Albanian guerrilla force has emerged in three predominantly Albanian municipalities close to the border with Kosovo.

The Liberation Army of Presevo, Bujanovac and Medvedja, OVPBM, is increasingly clashing with Serbian police. Following a recent exchange of fire, nearly two hundred Albanians fled from the village of Dobrosin to Kosovo carrying most of their belongings.

Albanian politicians say the new force, now believed to control a swathe of territory west of Bujanovac, came into being as direct result of an upsurge in Serbian police repression in the region last December.

The United Nations refugee agency, UNHCR, says Albanian who've fled the area "present consistent testimonies about harassment, beatings, confiscations of flats and houses, forced mobilisation, threatened rapes and requests for

money."

Nedzmedin Glogovci, a former teacher from the abandoned village of Konculj, told IWPR that 3,000 Serb refugees from Kosovo turned up in his neighbourhood bent on revenge, yet "our towns and villages have been occupied by the very same police that have terrorised Kosovo for years."

In Bujanovac, the police are said to have little regard for Albanian life. "If the policeman kills an Albanian no one asks him why he did it, or holds him to account," said unemployed Fahri Dedinca. "An Albanian's life is worth nothing."

Dedinac says he welcomes the formation of the new Albanian guerrilla force, "Anyone can enter my house, rob me, beat me, rape my wife or daughter-in-law. Well, that's why the OVPBM was formed. Those young men should be praised."

The Yugoslav Army believes that American secret services are behind the OVPBM. It alleges that US KFOR units provide the rebels logistical support and allow them to move bank and forth across the Kosovo border. Senior US officials in the area deny the charge.

Whatever the truth, what's clear is that the cycle of violence that triggered the NATO bombardment of Kosovo is beginning to repeat itself in southern Serbia. Serbian police are once more unable to subdue

Albanian rebels. But unlike Kosovo, federal forces are not expected to conduct a 'kill and burn' policy for fear of provoking another conflict with NATO.

The Serbian regime has instead been stepping up pressure on Albanians in southern Serbia to move to Kosovo. According to UNHCR, some 6,000 Albanians have left Presevo, Medvedja and Bujanovac since last June. Of the three municipalities, only Presevo retains an Albanian majority.

"The fundamental feeling of every Albanian in this region is fear - a paralysing fear," says the president of the Presevo municipality, Riza Halimi. "Patrols of 8 to 10 Serbian policeman are armed to the teeth pass the centre of town every day."

Serbian police are profiting from the exodus, charging families between 15 and 20,000 German Marks for safe passage across the border. "The price is rising as the tensions increase," said Sulejman Gashi from Medvedja. "More policemen are involved now, so they ask for more. They asked five thousand per head from my wife's brother who has six children."

Gashi hopes that the formation of the OVPBM will stem the flood of refugees. "Hope has returned to us with the emergence of our young fighters," he said. "Only women and children are now emigrating. Men are staying behind."

"We know the OVPBM are not as strong as the Serbian police. But most things start off small then grow. This is what it was like with the KLA."

A Serbian policeman at a checkpoint on the road to Presevo is full of foreboding, believing events are beginning to mirror the Kosovo conflict. "I smell trouble," he said. "I was a policeman in Kosovo. Like here, we were unnecessarily brutal towards Albanians. They endured it, emigrated, ran away, and then they created the KLA."

NATO manoeuvres in Kosovo announced later this month may serve as a catalyst for an escalation of the violence. Riza Halimi believes the exercises might provide the Yugoslav Army with the excuse its been looking for to deploy additional troops and intensify pressure on the Albanian community.

Halimi has good reason for his fears. On March 3 dozens of federal tanks and armoured personnel carriers moved towards the KFOR-controlled buffer zone separating the three municipalities from Kosovo. The move was described by Yugoslav Army commanders as the start of its regular spring exercises. There are also rumours the army is preparing to mobilise 100,000 reservists on the eve of the NATO manoeuvres.

But given that the Yugoslav military is probably loathe to risk another confrontation with NATO, the mobilisation rumours and the exercises are more likely to be part of Belgrade's campaign to panic the Albanians into fleeing southern Serbia.

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