

Albanians To Sign, Belgrade To Ignore

Author: IWPR

While the Albanians appear ready to sign up to Rambouillet and Belgrade continues to hold out, Western resolve appears to be waning.

New US special envoy Bob Dole arrived in Skopje Friday in the latest bid to push both sides toward sealing the Rambouillet agreement, as the momentum behind NATO involvement - both on the ground in Kosovo and in the air over Belgrade - slips further every day the deal remains unsigned.

The former US senator who left Washington without a Yugoslav visa, immediately set to lean on the political representatives on the Albanian side including Ibrahim Rugova's Democratic League of Kosova, Rexep Qosaj's Democratic Front and the independent delegates, Veton Surroi and Blerim Shala. Crucially, Dole has yet to link up with Hashim Thaci, 29 year-old head of the KLA. "I don't know where he is," Dole admitted to reporters mid-day Friday. Those delegates he found in Skopje, were told that once they were onboard, Washington would open the doors and provide both political and economic support, as well as help transform the KLA into a fully trained and equipped security force.

US impatience here is plain to see with at least one diplomat demanding that the Albanian team "grow up". The Albanians meantime resent the high-pressure tactics and fail to see how they are so much at fault when Belgrade is refusing even to grant Dole a visa.

For his part, Dole told reporters he was hoping to cross over into Kosovo to push Thaci and the KLA to sign and from there to move up Belgrade for talks with the Yugoslav leader. The Kansas statesman, well noted for his dry sense of humour, added that he had tried to speak with Milosevic already. "We're not going to give up. For sure he's going to take my call." He admitted that the first thing he needed was a visa, adding "and I don't mean the credit card."

With Belgrade's present refusal to sign, NATO is now finding itself back having to rebuild allied consensus for air strikes. In the past two weeks, in direct violation of the October accords brokered by US special envoy Richard Holbrooke, Belgrade has increased the level of its security forces in Kosovo to 28,000. Meanwhile, heavy fighting between the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) and the Serbian security forces has already resulted in a large number of casualties and thousands of refugees. [See Gjeraqina Tuhina, *Balkan Crisis Report*, No. 05.]

Dole and the US administration are thus looking to have all the Kosovars officially onboard before the March 15th deadline. Theoretically, this would put the pressure back on Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic, and allow Washington time to try and re-build NATO consensus for air strikes if Belgrade fails to sign when everybody meets up again in Normandy a week on Monday for Rambouillet Part II.

It will not be easy. Belgrade has already stated that it will not sign the agreement. With Serbian forces reinforcing in Kosovo, it appears that once again Belgrade smells a rift between the NATO allies and is willing to call their bluff. Balkan analysts argue that Belgrade currently has very little to gain from signing and very little to lose if they do not.

If they do, the most Belgrade will receive in return is the lifting of travel restrictions and a very minor lift on foreign investments. Observers argue that the outer wall economic sanctions and Belgrade's blockade from international political and economic organisations will remain. With the campaign against both air strikes and NATO ground troops growing stronger in some Western capitals, the likelihood that NATO forces will strike if Belgrade refuses once more, is looking less likely by the day.

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