

Ghosts of Vukovar Haunt Kumanovo

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Residents of Kumanovo fear their town may face the same fate as Vukovar

The people of the Kumanovo region of northern Macedonia are growing increasingly anxious as fighting between security forces and the National Liberation Army, NLA, fighters edges ever closer.

Following its offensive in the Tetovo region, the army now seems to have set its sights on NLA forces in the mountain villages around the town of Likove where Albanians make up 95 per cent of the 30,000 population.

Fighting has already been reported in the area, prompting Hysni Shaqiri, a deputy in the governing Democratic Party of Albanians, to quit and join the NLA. "Whoever wants to contact me can find me at the front line," read a statement he issued.

A highly respected local politician, Shaqiri's decision could encourage many more Albanians in the area to do the same. "I call on senior members of DPA and parliamentary deputies to join the freedom fighters," his statement declared.

Following his defection, the authorities issued for his arrest on the grounds of inciting rebellion.

Kumanovo, close to both the Serbian and Bulgarian borders, is home to around 110,000 people. A further 50 to 60,000 live in villages in the surrounding area.

The population is a potentially volatile mixture of Serbs, ethnic Macedonians and Albanians. Locals fear that if the conflict spreads to the town the situation could explode into tragic ethnic blood-letting. "Kumanovo could turn into a second Vukovar," said an ethnic Macedonian.

Inter-ethnic relations have always been Kumanovo's biggest challenge. The place has always been tense, with Serbs and ethnic Macedonians often in conflict with Albanians. The opening shots of the Second World War in Macedonia were fired in the town.

Over the past decade, fights and quarrels between youngsters over national issues have stoked up ethnic tensions and prompted many to question whether peaceful cohabitation will ever be possible.

More recently, the situation improved to some extent. The various communities have got on better, especially in business. But the town remains on a knife-edge. "If just one grenade goes off and causes casualties, people will blame each other - and the whole place could explode," said a local Serb.

Although there have been no reports of violence in the town since the crisis began, the streets are deserted at night and a heavy police presence makes the place feel under curfew.

A factor adding to local tension is the fact that many Albanians from the area fought with the KLA during

the Kosovo conflict.

Grievances are all the more acute because of the region's serious economic and social problems.

Up to a few years ago the area boasted the some of the most successful enterprises in the former Yugoslavia. But now many are barely ticking over or have closed down completely. Those still in work are paid miserably low wages, while the unemployed have to rely on tiny social benefits.

From the start of fighting around Tanusevac and Tetovo, the nearby border crossing between Macedonia and Serbia at Tabanovac has been packed with Kumanovo residents, Albanian and Serb, leaving to stay with friends and family in Presevo, Vranje and other towns in southern Serbia.

Almost all political parties in Kumanovo have called on voters to stay vigilant and calm. They have also called on those who have left the area to come home.

Soon after fighting broke out in Tanusevac, local political leaders and mayors from the surrounding municipalities gathered in Kumanovo town hall to discuss the crisis. Years of political rivalry were set aside, with all of the participants signing a declaration condemning the violence in Macedonia.

Most people in Kumanovo hark back to the 'good old days' of Yugoslavia. "We lived a good life, " said on resident. " Everybody had a job and we didn't have these problems and incidents. Now we are all afraid of the future - we really don't know what will happen next."

The summer is expected to be hot- and not just politically. A dry winter has left reservoirs almost empty and people in the region are preparing for serious water shortages.

But most, regardless of their ethnic origin, would tell you, "It'd be better to have no water than a war."

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