

Kosovo Leaders Urge Macedonia Negotiations

Author: [Philip O'Neil](#)

US pressure Kosovars to call for a peaceful resolution of the Macedonian crisis.

Kosovo politicians are urging the Macedonian government to sit down and negotiate with ethnic Albanian rebels.

They say the authorities in Skopje - who claimed at the weekend to have driven the insurgents out of the hills overlooking Tetovo - have no hope of defeating the insurgents in the long run.

"It's like trying to shoot flies with a pistol," said ex-KLA officer Naim Maloku, who's now a member of the Alliance for the Future of Kosovo, AAK.

At the same time, Kosovo politicians appear to be urging the NLA to curb its military activities and work towards an accommodation with the Skopje authorities.

Maloku's party, headed by former KLA leader Ramush Haradinaj was one of the three main Kosovan parties to sign a declaration last week condemning the violence in Macedonia.

This came as something of a surprise in Kosovo, because NLA leaders Ali Ahmeti and Amrush Xhemajli, along with Haradinaj, were founding members of the KLA.

Political party leaders are reluctant to comment on Ahmeti and Xhemajli. They deny having any influence over the NLA, but admit that some fighters are crossing over the border to Macedonia. With regular media reports of such movements they can hardly do otherwise.

The traffic of men and arms prompted the head of the US diplomatic mission in Pristina, Christopher Dell, to pen a scathing editorial in *Koha Ditore*.

He wrote that Kosovo Albanians had committed a "violation of our trust" by allowing the movement of extremists over the border. He went even further, "Is giving up the hopes of self governance forever really the price you want to pay to protect thieves and murderers?"

Since Ahmeti and Xhemajli were close friends of Haradinaj and Maloku, some have suggested that their condemnation of the violence in Macedonia is merely an attempt to appease the international community.

Yet the fact that over ten thousand Kosovars attending a rally in Pristina on Monday cheered student leader Afrim Hoti's appeals for a peaceful resolution to the Macedonian crisis suggests there may be a genuine desire for an end to the fighting. Only a small number of radicals chanted support for the NLA.

"Look, we've been through war here in Kosovo, we've seen the whole Balkans in crisis," said vice-president of the Democratic Party of Kosovo Hayredin Kuci. " We know that war is not a solution."

But political leaders here warn against any delay in the talks between the authorities and the NLA. "It risks strengthening support for the NLA," said Maloku at IWPR's Pristina office.

Postponement of negotiations could also further isolate the Democratic Party of Albanians, DPA, a member of the ruling coalition in Macedonia. Some observers suggest that the party may well be forced to leave the government if the fighting continues.

DPA chief Arben Xhaferi has been blamed for failing to redress ethnic Albanian rights, but political leaders here stress his continued participation in government is essential to avert the further polarisation of Macedonian society.

"Of course his position is a very difficult one," said Kuci. "After all he's part of a coalition fighting Albanians but he needs to stay with the government if the government wants peace."

PDK President Hasim Thaci told IWPR that "For the time being, he (Arben Xhaferi) is the only man who can move the process forward in a positive way."

The Macedonian government has so far refused to sit at the negotiating table with people they call "terrorists" but over the last few days the international community has begun to press them to do so.

Notably, US Secretary of State Colin Powell told the Macedonian government to act to address Albanian grievances.

And NATO Secretary General George Robertson and EU Security Chief Javier Solana have urged the Macedonian government to show restraint as they push further into the hills around Tetovo.

Thaci believes that Solana is key to impressing the international community's desire for dialogue on the Macedonian government.

When asked whether he thought the NLA would lay down their arms if negotiations were called Thaci said, "I can't speak on behalf of the armed groups, but there's a need to see concrete results from the negotiations."

Philip O'Neil is an Assistant Editor at IWPR

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