

## **Macedonia: Debut for Euro Troops**

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A new European force is brought in to keep the peace in Macedonia.

The European Union's fledgling Rapid Reaction Force is expected to perform its first spell of duty in the next few weeks when it takes over from NATO's peacekeeping mission in Macedonia.

The Greek ambassador to Brussels, Aristidis Agathocles, whose country currently holds the EU presidency, confirmed that the new force is set to deploy in the Balkan republic.

"We anticipate all the necessary issues will be solved very quickly and if I am not mistaken we would be prepared to send the contingent to FYROM (Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia) by March 15," he said last week.

The authorities in Skopje hope that after the force's six-months mandate expires there will be no need for further foreign military presence in Macedonia.

Senior government officials confirmed to IWPR that the foreign ministry was already working on details of the agreement to regulate the legal status of the European contingent.

EU foreign ministers approved the mission on January 27 after Macedonian president Boris Trajkovski, in a letter to the union's foreign and security chief, Javier Solana, invited the rapid reaction force to take over the NATO mission.

The officer who will lead the new mission, German Vice-Admiral Rainer Feist, told the European parliament in Brussels on February 18 that it would consist of 300 soldiers. "It will be a small but a significant operation," he said.

About 700 NATO troops were deployed in Macedonia in August 2001, after the peace agreement that put an end to the six-months-long conflict between ethnic Albanian rebels and the Macedonian authorities.

Trajkovski agreed to take the Euro troops after Solana visited Skopje on January 15. The latter said the EU was ready to take over the Alliance Harmony mission, the third one conducted by NATO in Macedonia after Essential Harvest and Amber Fox.

In a recent TV interview, Solana stressed that deployment of European troops in Macedonia was entirely at the invitation of the Skopje government.

The rapid reaction forces became operative in December when differences between Greece and Turkey over the new operation were overcome.

Solana said he expected no difficulties over the transfer from NATO to EU control.

The Macedonian ambassador to NATO, Nano Ruzin, told the daily Makedonija denes on January 23 that Skopje's parliament should ratify an agreement on the status of the new troop contingent, similar to the one that now governs relations with alliance forces. He said the operation would cost EU countries 4,700,000 euro.

The Macedonian authorities welcomed the fact that some NATO presence would remain, Prime Minister Branko Crvenkovski said during his visit to Belgrade on January 18.

"NATO will not completely leave Macedonia after March or April because there will still be its advisory body relating to reforms of the Macedonian military in order to prepare ourselves for faster integration into NATO," the premier said.

NATO representatives expressed confidence the Euro force will be successful even though this is its first mission. "These forces and other European troops are trained to the same standards as those in the alliance," NATO spokesperson Mark Laity told the state information agency, MIA.

Some Macedonian parliamentary deputies are sceptical about the new force.

Tito Petkovski, president of the parliamentary committee on defence and security, complained that the EU was using Macedonia as an experiment.

"Our leadership agreed to the Euro deployment without consulting parliament," said Petkovski, who belongs to the Social-Democratic Union, SDSM, the biggest party in the ruling coalition.

"We haven't reviewed all aspects of the agreement, details have not been agreed and I have not been told what reasons guided our leadership."

For the Albanian bloc in the current government a foreign military presence in Macedonia remained crucial.

"For us the international military presence in Macedonia is of prime interest no matter whether it comes under an EU or a NATO mandate," said Ermira Mehmeti, spokesperson of the Democratic Union for Integration, DUI, a ruling coalition member.

"We support the arrival of Euro forces because we believe it is essential for the maintenance of peace and stability and the return of trust."

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