

Macedonia: Jailed Albanian Insurgents Pardoned

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The release of imprisoned ex Albanian guerrillas under a government amnesty is seen as a crucial step towards peace in Macedonia.

Former Albanian insurgents have been streaming happily out of jail in Macedonia this week, following a new amnesty law that has been hailed as an important milestone on the road back to lasting peace.

With the scenes of joy outside the prison gates as the released prisoners embraced their families, there are signs that tensions between Macedonia's rival communities are slowly diffusing.

The first batch of 18 prisoners was freed by Monday night according to the justice ministry. The release of around 270 detainees awaiting trial will follow, sources in the ministry say.

The legislation was hailed by Portuguese foreign minister Jaime Gama, current chairman of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, OSCE. "Adoption of this law represents a significant measure towards the full implementation of the principles agreed in Ohrid," he said.

Optimistic statements were also issued by former Albanian guerrilla leaders who waged an eight-month civil war last year to secure improved civil rights for their community.

"The amnesty law has broken the key barrier to achieving peace," said Ali Ahmeti, political representative of the former KLA rebel group. Gezim Ostreni, commanding general of the NLA guerrillas, declared, "society will now return to normal."

Those released this week included Fatmir Limani, head of the group called the Kicevo bombers, who was arrested in 1998, along with other Albanian students accused of attacking Macedonian police stations in Kumanovo, Kicevo and Bitola. Semi Hebib who was recently extradited from Germany on charges of attacking a police station was also freed.

The law passed by Macedonia's parliament last week granted a pardon to all those Albanian guerrillas who handed in their arms before September 26 last year and those who are under investigation for their alleged role in the conflict before 2001. It also amnestied men who refused conscription for army service and others who deserted.

Lack of such legislation had proved a major stumbling block to implementing the Ohrid peace agreement, signed on August 13, which stipulated a reform of Albanian civil rights. Most Albanians accepted the terms of the deal but guerrilla leaders refused to leave their strongholds until given cast iron assurances that they would not be arrested and punished.

Adoption of the amnesty is expected to damp down fears, largely promoted by right-wingers among the Macedonian majority, that Albanians have been plotting a new offensive in the spring.

Macedonia's president Boris Trajkovski had proclaimed a pardon for guerrillas last October. But his pledge was not fully observed. A number of NLA members were arrested over recent months in the north-west of

the country on charges of refusing to hand over their weapons by the September 26 deadline.

Guerrilla leaders insisted that the Trajkovski pledge should be underwritten by solid legislation. Ahmeti and Ostreni, who received news of the new law at their Tetovo stronghold in the mountainous north, now hope to be reintegrated into the political life in the country.

But not all former NLA fighters are so convinced that they can come down from the mountains and feel safe. They believe that differences over interpretation of the law could still cause them problems.

"I'm not confident that I won't be arrested. The police might accuse us of possessing arms or that we have not handed them over in time," said a former NLA fighter who dares not return to his family village near Skopje. He and many like him refer to the numerous arrests of the Albanians in the recent months on charges of failing to hand over their weapons on time and continuing to carry out military activity.

Macedonian leaders were reluctant to introduce the amnesty law. They objected to the idea of former NLA fighters being integrated into political life. "The law should not have been passed," said a middle-aged Macedonian from Skopje who gave name only as Aleksandar. "The NLA have killed many of our soldiers. But now the law is passed and we cannot do anything about it."

The prevalence of his view was demonstrated by the way parliamentary proceedings on the amnesty law were handled by television. The moment the legislation was approved, the live TV broadcast was blacked out for fear of inciting disturbances among the Macedonian majority.

The amnesty should help secure a return of regular police officers to villages from which they have been barred by hostile Albanians up to now. The villagers said police would not be permitted entry until the legislation was passed. Now they will have no obvious excuse for keeping them out.

"The different ethnic communities will benefit from the stability of the situation," said Stevo Pendarovski, presidential advisor for national security.

The return of police and displaced residents to the crisis areas will enable a census to proceed and preparations for early elections, in which former NLA members can take part, to begin.

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