

Macedonia: Militants Threaten Renewed Conflict

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Government insists it can contain shadowy Albanian militant group threatening a spring offensive.

A phantom guerilla group, called the Albanian National Army, ANA, is threatening to disrupt Macedonia's fragile peace process.

Last week, eyewitnesses told IWPR they saw uniformed ANA members around Lipkovo and Tetovo, in western Macedonia, raising fears among locals of a new cycle of ethnic conflict.

ANA representatives three weeks ago informed the Albanian-language media of a "hot spring offensive" in 2003 in majority-Albanian districts. The group's web site www.shqiperiaebashkuar.com warns that Macedonia is a state "where following the armed conflicts of the last few years, political deals have not yet showed enough results and progress".

The ANA has made a similar threat last year, but didn't carry it out.

The group emerged out of the Albanian insurgency in Macedonia in 2001, claiming responsibility for killing 10 Macedonian soldiers on the Skopje-Tetovo road in August that year.

After the Ohrid agreement was signed in August 2001, ending the armed conflict, it claimed responsibility for other attacks on government targets.

Valdet Vardari, the pseudonym used by the head of the Albanian National Union Front, ANUF, the political body that allegedly commands the ANA, claimed in recent interviews with the print media that a division named "Skenderbeg" was operating in the same areas the rebels controlled in the 2001 conflict.

The group is believed to unite former fighters of the National Liberation Army, NLA, who opposed the Ohrid deal and members of other militant groups that have since dissolved, such as the Kosovo Liberation Army, KLA, and the Liberation Army of Presevo, Medvedje and Bujanovac, UCPMB, which mounted an insurgency campaign in southern Serbia.

"From the first moment the Ohrid agreement was signed, ANA publicly stated that we do not recognise it and judge it as harmful and treacherous," Vardari told the Skopje Albanian weekly Lobi last week.

Ahmeti's rift with hard liners began during the Macedonian conflict over his preference for negotiated settlement. He angered them further when he moved into mainstream politics ahead of the 2002 general elections. Ahmeti's party, the Democratic Union for Integration, DUI, now holds five ministries in the new centre-left government of Branko Crvenkovski.

Now the ANA accuses him of betraying Albanian national interests. Vardari said Ahmeti entered into a "coalition with the Slav Macedonian occupiers of Albanian ethnic land. We have no trust in the occupiers and their Albanian collaborators".

The accusations leveled against Ahmeti's DUI in the media have increased pressure on him to deliver. Radical Albanians have attacked the DUI for accepting a junior position in the government coalition and for making too many compromises with ethnic Macedonians.

After becoming aware that ANA fighters were mustering their forces in western Macedonia, Ahmeti visited Switzerland this January to meet his former NLA allies who now control ANA's leadership, according to diplomatic sources.

They say Ahmeti tried to convince them to abandon their plans for a spring offensive, promising political progress for the Albanians in the near future, but he failed to secure any pledges from the ANA leadership.

Last weekend, DUI offices in Gostivar and Skopje were raked by gunfire and hit by a rocket launcher respectively. No group accepted responsibility for the attacks while the police have not released any information about the incidents.

Several former NLA commanders sent Ahmeti a public letter, published on January 24 in the Skopje daily Fakti, urging his maximum engagement in the quest to improve Albanian rights in the country. "Act now before it is too late," the letter said, "because tomorrow might be too late".

"When I joined the NLA, I didn't fight for someone to take office and then form a brotherhood with the Slavs," the Kosovo daily Koha Ditore quoted one of the ex-NLA members as saying. "When we were fighting, the leadership of NLA claimed we were fighting against the Macedonian Slavs but now Ali Ahmeti want his son to be a friend with Jovan from Stip."

The new DUI ministers say the accusations are unjust. "It is not fair to blame a party for not fulfilling its promises after only two or three months in power," DUI deputy prime minister, Musa Xhaferi, told the Albanian weekly Lobi two weeks ago.

ANA representatives have confirmed that their fighters are concentrating their efforts in the mountainous areas in the Skopje, Tetovo and Kumanovo area in the north and north-west. And the group is now said to be planning to deploy troops around Kicevo and Gostivar in the west. "There are several armed groups consisting of 20 to 30 men but they do not pose a serious threat," Lazar Kitanovski, the Prime Minister's security advisor told the daily Utrinski Vesnik.

The authorities remain confident they can contain any threat the fighters pose. "The government is aware there are groups who call themselves ANA. According to our information, this is not a strong structure, but comprises people involved in crime, rackets and illegal activities," the interior minister Hari Kostov said on Tuesday. Kostov said the ministry would take all necessary measures to deal with them.

The US ambassador to Macedonia, Laurence Butler, told a press conference in Skopje on January 29, "There will be no spring offensive. War is over here. People who have guns should go back from where they have come, or will be facing us."

NATO spokesperson Craig Ratkloff said while the situation in Macedonia was fragile, all groups needed to address their demands through legitimate institutions.

Western intelligence sources told IWPR the ANA is not capable of seriously destabilising Macedonia, as it cannot count on support from local Albanians. But they said no one should be too complacent about the threat posed by ANA in the long run.

"They have started coordinating their activities and collecting money in Switzerland, Germany, Belgium, Kosovo and Albania," they said. "In six to ten months they hope to be prepared for action."

Location: Macedonia
Albania
Serbia
Kosovo

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