

Macedonia: New Twist in 'Terrorist' Shooting Saga

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Seven so-called terrorists killed by Macedonian police appear to have been workers trying to reach Athens to get jobs at the Olympic Games

Macedonia's media have questioned official accounts of the killing of seven men shot dead by police earlier this year on the outskirts of Skopje.

Police said the men, six from Pakistan and one from India, planned attacks on Western embassies in the Macedonian capital. They said bags containing uniforms of the Kosovo Liberation Army, KLA, and weapons were found with the "mujahedin" fighters.

Media suspicions were aroused by the fact that the interior ministry altered its version of events several times.

Initially, the ministry said police intercepted the seven men in a van. It later withdrew all mention of a van and said the group of seven opened fire on a police patrol from a two-door jeep. TV pictures showed a jeep whose windscreen had two bullet holes.

The latest official version of the March 2 incident said police knew the group was coming and ambushed them, thus explaining why none of the police sustained any injuries.

One Western diplomat who was permitted to view the corpses said they were riddled with dozens of bullets. But none of the bags containing KLA uniforms that police said they found with the men had holes in them.

This raised suspicions that police planted the bags on the bodies after the killing, as part of their propaganda war against ethnic Albanian militants in Macedonia and their allies in Kosovo.

Western diplomats voiced particular alarm over the reliability of the police account when the interior ministry rejected a request for foreign forensic experts to look at the bodies.

The police said they had sent photographs of the bodies and their fingerprints to Interpol and had requested help in identifying the men.

But the police version of events sustained another blow when a US newspaper identified at least one of the men, Bilal Kazmi, as a Pakistani migrant worker looking for a job in Greece.

The discovery came to light after Christopher Cooper, a reporter from The Wall Street Journal, contacted Kazmi's brother Dabir in Athens, where he had migrated in 1999.

Cooper showed him a book published by the Macedonian interior ministry called "Islamic fundamentalism in Macedonia". Among photographs of the seven dead men, Dabir recognised his brother Bilal.

In a front page article on May 28, the newspaper recounted Bilal's tragic journey from Pakistan through Iran, Turkey and Bulgaria to Greece, where he had hoped to join his brother and find work in the run-up to the 2004 Olympic games. The article claimed that the Macedonian police spun the story about terrorists for their own benefit.

Since then, the Greek newspaper Eleftherotipia contacted other relatives of the dead men in Greece, as well as the family of the Indian national back in India. All confirmed that their relatives had been trying to get to Athens to find work.

The title also revealed that the six Pakistanis belonged to the Shiite Muslim community, a religious minority in Pakistan that has been frequently targeted by Sunni extremists linked to Osama Bin Laden's al-Qaeda network. This discovery cast further doubt on Macedonian claims that the men were terrorists.

The newspaper said the Macedonian authorities had resorted to desperate methods in their attempt to link their own internal battle with ethnic Albanian insurgents to last year's US-led war against the Taliban Islamists in Afghanistan.

Macedonia's hard line interior minister, Ljubo Boskovski, not surprisingly, has refused to budge, saying the case is now closed. His spokesmen insist the seven men were indeed terrorists.

However, Boskovski's critics say it may have been no accident that the "terrorists" were shot dead only days before The Hague war crimes tribunal were due to exhume the bodies of ethnic Albanians killed by

police in the village of Ljuboten in last year's conflict.

Boskovski says attempts to link the two events - and suggestions that the shooting was a diversion - form part of a campaign by his internal enemies and their western friends to undermine him.

The bodies of the seven men remain in a morgue in Skopje. An official Pakistani delegation is expected to come and eventually take them away. In the meantime, relatives of the dead have not been allowed to remove them while the investigation continues.

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