

Macedonia: Ohrid Accord Breakthrough

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The Skopje authorities aim to have peace deal in place by 2004.

An action plan to fully implement the Ohrid agreement is to be adopted by the Macedonian government next week, heralding a new era of cooperation for the region.

The plan envisages amendments to more than 90 laws to meet the requirements laid down in the agreement, which brought the republic's civil conflict to an end in August 2001. The reforms should be in force by the end of next year.

"The Ohrid Agreement is the most important political document for the future of Macedonia," Deputy Premier Musa Xhaferi of the Democratic Union for Integration party, who is in charge of its implementation, told IWPR.

"There are no obstacles so far, but if we want to avoid big mistakes in implementation, we have to prepare the strategy well. That is why we have drawn up an action plan, which will come into effect very soon."

The plan, scheduled to be adopted on January 13, was created at a top-level meeting on December 26, when the Macedonian President Boris Trajkovski met government officials and party leaders in the presence of the United States ambassador Lawrence Battler and European Union special representative Alexis Brouhns.

Only VMRO-DPMNE leader Ljupco Georgievski - who was prime minister at the time the agreement was signed - did not take part, apparently in protest against the arrest of members of his party on corruption charges.

"I believe it was a good meeting," said Brouhns. "All the attending parties and the government confirmed their determination to complete implementation of the agreement."

Government spokesman Saso Colakovski agreed, describing the Ohrid accord as "the political backbone that keeps this government together".

"Its implementation - together with the fight against organised crime, corruption and poverty - is one of our most important priorities," he said.

Decentralisation is a main issue outlined in the agreement, and is being treated as a priority. The government is to prepare a set of laws to begin this process by December 2003 at the very latest, with the transfer of authority from central to local level planned for the end of 2004.

Two other priorities identified at the December meeting was the need to build confidence and strengthen security measures in the wake of the conflict and the the safe return of around 8,000 displaced persons - mostly ethnic Macedonians - to former crisis regions.

The issue of representation in the state administration is also being tackled, but officials have warned that this will not happen overnight. "The biggest problems are Macedonia's unfavourable economic and social climate and high unemployment," Xhaferi told IWPR.

"The agreement asks us to employ more ethnic Albanians in the state administration at a time when we have already had to lay off thousands of its employees - mostly Macedonians. There is a danger that political opponents may try to use this as an argument that Ohrid is favouring the former over the latter.

"But we are preparing our priorities in a number of institutions where more Albanians are going to be employed with a minimum of Macedonians being made redundant. This process will be transparent and we hope that everyone will understand that this is not against any one group."

Cooperation between the Macedonian authorities and Albanian leaders was further cemented on January 6, when Prime Minister Branko Crvenkovski held an Orthodox Christmas lunch for all members of his government. President Boris Trajkovski was also invited to the event, which is being seen as a sign that the Macedonian-Albanian coalition is going from strength to strength.

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