

Macedonia: Peace Deal Deadlock Broken

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Western envoys kick-start parliamentary debate over Macedonian peace accord

After weeks of deadlock, Macedonia's legislators have agreed to resume a debate on the package of constitutional reforms seen as crucial to consolidating the country's fragile peace process.

NATO and EU envoys flew in to Skopje last week on another mission to kick-start the parliamentary process needed to sustain the August peace accord brokered in Ohrid between the country's Macedonian majority and Albanian minority, which ended their four-month armed uprising in the west of the republic.

After tense talks, the NATO secretary-general, George Robertson, and the EU foreign policy chief, Javier Solana, announced they had brokered a deal, which would enable parliament to ratify the Ohrid accord by the end of this month.

Media reports suggested the two envoys had struck a bargain with the government under which former fighters of the National Liberation Army will be pardoned in exchange for Albanian deputies ending their boycott of parliament and agreeing to discuss a hotly contested phrase about sovereignty in the Macedonian constitution.

President Boris Trajkovski will now submit the constitutional package to parliament by next Friday in the presence of the Albanian deputies.

The president has already announced a pardon for the guerrillas, which was supposed to create conditions for their re-integration into society. Its implementation has been largely sabotaged by interior ministry hardliners bent on prosecuting the fighters, who officially disbanded last month after surrendering an agreed quota of weapons to international peacekeepers.

One police official said the ministry had already begun legal action against 224 former NLA men, including its leader, Ali Ahmeti. The authorities are currently holding about 140 Albanian fighters in jail.

The interior ministry's intrigues have angered Trajkovski's advisers, who complain that attempts by the Macedonian side to duck its obligations merely result in increased Western pressure.

A combination of obstruction, boycotts and attempts to impose new conditions on the Ohrid deal has delayed the parliamentary vote on legislation granting greater rights to the Albanian community.

The Albanian deputies withdrew from parliament after a row over whether the reform package should be considered indivisible, which is what the Albanians wanted, or debated item by item, as the Macedonians wanted.

The second point of conflict involved the reference to the sovereignty of the Macedonian nation in the constitutional preamble, which Albanians see as discriminatory. The parties agreed to delete the phrase at Ohrid but the Macedonian parties subsequently reopened the issue.

The Albanians refused to renegotiate, saying it threatened to undermine the whole package. "Even the smallest change in the framework agreement can jeopardise the peace talks," said Abduljadi Vejseli, of the Albanian Party for Democratic Prosperity, one of the two main Albanian parties in the assembly.

Since then the two sides have remained in deadlock. Most Macedonians look on the sovereignty reference as an essential safeguard. "It is crucial to keep the reference in the [constitution's] preamble. We lose our country if we don't," said Vlatko Stojanovski, a salesman.

The Albanians are equally determined to see the back of it. "If anybody wants to bring the reference to the 'Macedonian people' back into the preamble, we will want the 'Albanian people' included along side it," said Ilijaz Halimi, vice-president of the Democratic Party of Albanians, the other big Albanian party in the assembly.

In spite of the apparent success of the Western envoys, the peace process could still come unstuck in the coming weeks. The reforms need a two-thirds majority to succeed and although the four parties that backed the August peace agreement hold more than 90 of the 120 seats, at least a dozen hard line nationalists in their ranks have warned they will vote against a deal.

Misko Tilevski, a deputy of the ruling nationalist Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation, VMRO-DPMNE, expressed their point of view. While the rest of the world was fighting terrorism, he said, "our terrorists are receiving diplomatic recognition".

Another spoke in the wheels may come from Stojan Andov, the hard line president of the assembly, who has said he will not ratify any deal until 15 Macedonians abducted by Albanian guerrillas earlier this year are released. "Not one amendment will be put into practice until the issue of missing civilians is solved," he said. Macedonia's tortuous peace process still has a long way to go.

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