

## **Missiles Seized in Albania**

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Albanian police have arrested four people smuggling in surface-to-air missiles allegedly destined for Albanian separatists in Macedonia.

The seizure in Albania of three shoulder-launched surface-to-air missiles allegedly destined for Albanian separatists in Macedonia has sparked fears of a brewing security threat in the region.

The SA-7B Strela missiles were intercepted on December 13. They are believed to have originated in Bosnia or Serbia and may have been destined for Macedonia, where ethnic-Albanian insurgents fought a brief war against the authorities in 2001.

Albanian police arrested four people – Sokol Mujaj, Ilim Isufi, Armir Troshani and Mentor Cani – in possession of the missiles shortly after they entered the country from Montenegro.

Bajram Ibraj, director-general of the Albanian police, said, "Four men were caught travelling with the missiles on the Rinas-Vlora road, in a van belonging to a company dealing in sausages. This was a police operation prepared in advance. We are still investigating the origin and destination of the missiles, and our counterparts in Montenegro are also investigating."

Security sources told IWPR that an Albanian separatist group operating in Kosovo and Macedonia is believed to have ordered the missile. The deal was allegedly brokered by a Bosnian national, who sourced the weapons from a group with links to Islamist and criminal networks.

The Russian-made Strela and other surface-to-air missiles, SAMs, pose a significant threat to both civilian and military aircraft. Similar shoulder-launched missiles were launched - unsuccessfully - against an Israeli airliner in Mombasa in 2002 and a more advanced version, Strela 3, hit a DHL cargo plane on approach to Baghdad airport in 2003.

According to IWPR's security source, ethnic Albanian extremists in Macedonia have dramatically stepped up military activities in the last three months.

They have attempted to obtain SAMs from several sources, possibly for use against surveillance drones and Macedonian attack helicopters. There has also been an upsurge in recruitment, local and international funding and the purchase of medical supplies. The source also claims that insurgent radio communication networks silent since 2001 have recently been heard making test broadcasts.

Tension has been rising in Macedonia since mid-November, when up to 300 armed ethnic Albanians appeared in the village of Kondovo near Skopje. The men have since taken control of the village, digging trenches apparently unhindered by security forces.

Their intentions are unclear, as are their loyalties.

The interior ministry has dismissed the men as a group of criminals, while speculation in the local press says they are Islamists linked to a foreign-funded madrassah or religious school in the village.

Some local sources claim they are simply unemployed men airing their frustration with the leader of the Albanian party now in the country's governing coalition, Ali Ahmeti, over the poor state of the economy.

Whatever the explanation behind the Kondovo incident and the arms intercept, analysts warn that the combination of unfinished political business, porous borders, weak law enforcement and a plentiful supply of weapons continues to pose a threat to the stability of the Balkans.

However, international attempts to step up efforts against organised crime in the region, including arms trafficking, are bearing some fruit.

The announcement of the missile seizure came during a regional conference in Tirana, hosted by Albania's ministry of public order, on tackling small arms and light weapons trafficking in south-east Europe.

The conference was organised by the Southeast European Co-operation Initiative, SECI, a Bucharest-based centre for regional co-operation on organised crime, and was attended by law enforcement officers from around the region.

As well as SECI, there are numerous police training, liaison and assistance schemes in the region run by Interpol, the United Nations, the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe and the European Union.

It is clear, however, that the task of combating arms trafficking is huge.

One conference delegate, who did not want to be named, pointed out that as no Balkan country grades its criminal intelligence according to the reliability of its sources, it is hard for SECI to assess it.

"The idea of doing serious analysis of criminal organisations - the kind that would allow one to take down a whole network rather than just individuals - is also new," he added.

Not only is there considerable mistrust between different national police forces, there is also limited co-operation between the various law-enforcement agencies within the same country.

Yet many south-eastern European countries are working to limit the trafficking of weapons through their territory, partly to meet strict membership criteria laid down by the European Union, and also to show the West that they are serious about tackling organised crime gangs.

There is no doubt that Albania and others in the region are making progress, but the improvements sometimes run in parallel to criminal activity that allegedly reaches the highest levels of government.

Erion Veliaj, leader of the Albanian civic protest movement Mjaft! (Enough!), told IWPR, "Everything the government doesn't traffic itself, it intercepts to impress the international community."

Earlier in 2004, Prime Minister Fatos Nano was accused of facilitating the trafficking of arms to the ethnic Albanian Kosovo Liberation Army, KLA, on the strength of allegedly incriminating conversations he had in 1997. He subsequently said that assisting the KLA was morally justifiable.

“[Nano’s] Kosovo trafficking admission proves people at the top of government know how to traffic arms, and so it may have happened in other incidents. I’ve seen Albanian-made Kalashnikovs in Rwanda with my own eyes,” said Veliaj.

Moving weapons, drugs, human beings or contraband across Balkan borders is slowly becoming a riskier business, but it will be many years before trans-national criminals decide that the likelihood of being captured and successfully prosecuted outweighs the attractiveness of illicit profits.

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