

NATO Brawling Upsets Macedonians

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Macedonians say trouble-making NATO troops are abusing their hospitality.

Outbreaks of violence involving unruly NATO troops in Macedonia are worsening relations between the western military alliance and local people.

The trouble is being caused by some of 4,500 NATO troops stationed in Macedonia and visiting Alliance troops from Kosovo.

A German soldier stationed in the Macedonian capital, Skopje, says the "Kosovo soldiers are isolated, two three months at a time, so when they get here, they are prone to getting drunk and getting into fights."

In one incident at a Skopje café last week, a large group of drunken American marines, who had been pestering girls on neighbouring tables, brawled with customers at a nearby square. A policeman who tried to intervene was hit by a brick.

The fight was stopped by police reinforcements who took away the American soldiers to be sobered up.

According to unofficial information, all the soldiers involved in this and a string of similar disturbances had participated in recent NATO exercises in Kosovo.

A KFOR spokesman in Skopje confirmed that the American military and Macedonian civilian police were investigating the incidents which, some US military officials believe, were provoked by locals.

"KFOR deeply regrets the incidents. We wish to stress that such behaviour is not what we expect from our troops," Reinicke said.

For its part, KFOR has complained that 22 of its vehicles have been stoned since the beginning of April.

A series of violent altercations involving KFOR troops have been reported over the past year.

"They sing, shout and bang the car doors," said Skopje resident, Aco Kitanovski. "They act abnormally and mainly provoke the girls."

Another resident, Kire Manevski, says trouble-making KFOR soldiers are a disgrace, "What sort of behaviour is that - drinking away and attacking people? They definitely abuse our hospitality."

At the height of the NATO campaign in Kosovo, 19 elite British soldiers were beaten up after picking a fight with five waiters at a posh Skopje restaurant. Two of the soldiers ended up in hospital.

At the time, the extreme nationalist Serbian leader, Vojislav Seselj, congratulated the Macedonian waiters, saying they had taught the "British occupier" a lesson.

In Kumanovo last summer, several Danish KFOR soldiers stripped off and jumped into the town fountain. They were beaten up by residents appalled by their behaviour.

According to police sources, NATO troops have been involved in 182 traffic accidents and were the cause in nearly 75 per cent of cases.

The most tragic of all was a collision between a KFOR vehicle and a government car carrying Minister Radovan Stojkovski, his wife and daughter. The family along with their driver were killed.

The Norwegian KFOR driver caused the accident, but will be tried in his own country, much to the anger of the Macedonian public.

Particularly infuriating was the Norwegian prosecutor's ruling that the KFOR driver would be tried for careless driving, not involuntary manslaughter, the charge Macedonians expected him to face.

Legal experts were warning the government right at the start of the NATO mission in Macedonia that it had paid insufficient attention to the details of the terms and conditions under which the international force was to operate in the country.

One key oversight, some Macedonians believe, was the government's agreement to allow NATO troops who commit crimes here to be tried by courts in their native countries.

Many in Macedonia believe the authorities have been lenient towards NATO in the hope of speeding up its membership of the Alliance.

Professor of Constitutional Law at the Law Faculty in Skopje, Svetomir Skaric, has warned that the status of KFOR troops in the country is in violation of the Macedonian Constitution.

Former minister and legal expert, Djordji Naumov, proposed at a recent meeting of the government's advisory body, the Legal Council, new legislation obliging the government to compensate citizens affected by the actions of NATO troops.

Zeljko Bajic is a regular contributor to IWPR.

Location: Macedonia
Kosovo

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