

## **Nato's Questionable Harvest**

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The alliance's operation to disarm Albanian fighters hangs in the balance as violence flares.

The upsurge in fighting between security forces and ethnic Albanian rebels, which immediately followed 12 days of negotiations at Ohrid culminating August 8, could derail the entire NATO peacekeeping programme in Macedonia.

Even if open civil war can be averted in the next 48 hours, NATO's plan for a 30-day, "quick fix" of Macedonia's festering ethnic violence looks highly optimistic. The death of a further 8 Macedonian soldiers just three days before an agreement was to be signed, looks set only to fuel further violence, with heavy fighting reporting in the Albanian-majority second city of Tetovo.

Javier Solana, the EU representative for foreign affairs and security who brokered the ceasefire that led to the Ohrid agreement, remained hopeful that NATO forces could be deployed by the end of the month.

He told the BBC August 9, he believed the accord would last, but advised NATO to act as speedily as possible after the agreement is signed, scheduled for Monday August 13. NATO's Operation Essential Harvest, aimed at collecting weapons from rebels of the National Liberation Army, NLA, was due to start within two weeks after approval of the Ohrid peace agreement.

The deal provides for wider use of the Albanian language, the recruitment of more Albanians into the police force, greater recognition of Islam and Catholicism in the constitution and positive steps towards improving living standards for Albanians.

However, EU peace mediator Francois Leotard was less sanguine after Macedonian jets bombed NLA positions around the north-western town of Tetovo, injuring at least 10 civilians. "I remain very cautious," he told journalists yesterday, "because, if the situation continues to deteriorate on the ground, what has been established and concluded in paper could be called into question."

He said there were no guarantees that NLA leaders would accept the peace agreement since they had not participated in the Ohrid negotiations. According to the terms agreed before the fighting broke out, President Boris Trajkovski was due to announce an amnesty for NLA members deemed not guilty of crimes against humanity.

While insisting publicly that the plans for early deployment remain in place, off the record NATO officials in Brussels say there is little chance while the situation on the ground continues to deteriorate.

While Macedonians are suspicious of a NATO presence, many Albanians view it as Macedonia's last chance of averting ethnic war. "No matter what kind of operation is planned, only NATO can bring peace and stability after all that happened" said Zija, an elderly Albanian in Skopje's Old Bazaar.

Ymer Ymeri, a leader of the Albanian Party for Democratic Prosperity, was also hopeful that the agreement would last. "I'm optimistic that NATO will continue with the operation after the political agreement is signed," he told IWPR. "It will be a wonder if NATO does not send troops, despite all that incidents of the past few days."

However, there remain serious limitations as to what Operation Essential Harvest can achieve, given its mandate. NATO was expected to deploy a joint force of 3.500 soldiers from France, Germany, the Czech Republic, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Holland, Norway, Spain, Turkey, UK and USA, according to major Barry Johnson, K-FOR's spokesman in Macedonia.

"After we receive the orders for deployment, NATO forces can be fully operative and ready for the Essential Harvest operation within two weeks," he told a press conference in Skopje on August 7. They will arrive following the signing of two agreements with Macedonian government that define the troops' terms of operation and other technical details.

"The logistic forces are ready to deploy within 48 hours. The operation will last 30 days," Johnson said.

Norwegian General Guner Lange, currently head of the K-FOR logistical operation in Macedonia, will command the force from an operational headquarters based near Skopje. Four group headquarters will be created with responsibility for collecting NLA weapons and bringing them to a location outside Macedonia.

"The central location is not determined yet and there are several options, but the most important is that as many weapons as possible are collected," said Major Johnson.

Ethnic Macedonian political parties are concerned that NATO's weapons-collection programme will prove a charade. They point to a similar programme in Kosovo in 2000 when, at Brussels' insistence, NATO troops were confined to collecting only guns that were surrendered voluntarily by fighters of the Kosovo Liberation Army, KLA. The operation resulted in the collection of just 100 old Chinese Kalashnikovs and a few heavy calibre weapons that should have been in a museum. People fear that, like the KLA, NLA fighters will simply hide the weapons for use in future operations.

Ethnic Albanians counter that NATO should also seek to disarm Macedonian civilians and paramilitary groups who, they claim, have been issued with weapons by the interior ministry in recent months. They are also concerned that NATO's planned 30-day presence in Macedonia is too short and that a new round of violence will erupt as soon as they leave.

The position of Prime Minister Ljupco Georgievski, a hardliner and fierce critic of compromise with the Albanian minority, also provides grounds for concern. During the last round of the negotiations in Ohrid, he articulated his doubts that the NLA would willingly hand over its weapons, asking for precise guarantees from Brussels for the weapons-collection programme. The US facilitator at Ohrid, James Pardew, described his intervention as "a big setback for the negotiations".

NATO's ambassador to Macedonia, Hans Jorg Eiff, reassured Georgievski that "in the agreement between NATO and NLA there will be an additional document with a precise list of weapons which NATO expects to be handed over".

The comment provoked the malicious comment in Skopje that NATO should know the "precise list" of weapons in NLA hands since they were armed and trained by Western countries before the NATO war against Serbia more than two years ago.

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