

Presevo Albanians Seek Autonomy

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Presevo Albanians leaders set conditions for ending the year-long conflict in the region.

Presevo Albanian leaders in southern Serbia appear to be demanding autonomy as the price for peace in the troubled region.

Riza Halimi, mayor of Presevo and leader of the Party of Democratic Action, said the majority Albanian population sought recognition of their 1992 referendum vote in favour of political and territorial autonomy for the Presevo, Bujanovac and Medvedja region.

Any union with Kosovo, Halimi said, would be predicated on the international community agreeing to a re-drawing of borders with Serbia.

The Albanians' demands come in response to proposals put forward by Belgrade, which they rejected on the grounds that they would "prejudice the final results of talks" between the two.

While the Serbian proposals rule out autonomy, they pledge a step-by-step demilitarisation of the area, guarantee the civil and human rights of local Albanians and propose big improvements in the local economy and infrastructure.

Halimi said he welcomed Belgrade's initiative, but had several objections to the content and the "take-it-or-leave-it attitude" of the Serbian authorities.

The Presevo mayor also protested over the government's labeling of local armed groups as terrorists.

The Liberation Army of Presevo, Medvedja and Bujanovac, UCPMB, made its first appearance in January 2000 at a funeral of two Albanian brothers allegedly killed by Serbian police.

Halimi said the organisation had grown up out of a need to protect the local Albanian community from brutal and oppressive treatment by Serbian security forces.

The mayor said there would be no peace until the Serbian army and police withdrew from the area. He accused them of perpetrating atrocities in Kosovo prior to their forced withdrawal from the province in 1999.

The crisis in the Presevo valley has been rumbling for over a year. An Albanian separatist movement, which seeks union of the area with neighbouring Kosovo, has coalesced around the UCPMB.

On February 4, Presevo Albanian military and political representatives, including members of the UCPMB, met in the village of Veliki Trnavac to agree a united stand in future negotiations with Belgrade.

But Belgrade is sending conflicting signals over its readiness to talk to the Albanians.

Federal Foreign Minister Goran Svilanovic has said it is up to the Albanians to decide who would represent them in negotiations. At the same time, Yugoslav President Vojislav Kostunica has insisted that the Albanian negotiating team must not include members of the UCPMB.

"They can indirectly express themselves, they can influence and even blackmail their community, but people who have taken up arms are not legitimate representatives of the Albanians," he said.

All parties on the Albanian side, however, insist the UCPMB is included in any negotiations.

Naim Jerliy, deputy president of Ibrahim Rugova's Democratic League of Kosovo, called on the international community to mediate in finding a "political solution".

"The position of Presevo Albanians should be supported, including their insistence that without the participation of UCPMB there can be no successful negotiations," he said.

On February 13, UCPMB commander Shefket Musliu said negotiations could not take place without his organisation.

"We enjoy a legitimacy because we are supported by the population," Shefket Musliu said. "As long as Kostunica calls us terrorists, there will be no negotiations".

In an interview for the Pristina daily newspaper Zeri, Sean Sullivan, political advisor to the commander of the international peacekeeping force in Kosovo, K-For, said, "I think Serbia and Yugoslavia should concentrate on the peaceful solution of the crisis and not on who's going to be involved in the negotiations."

Despite widespread media coverage and avid public interest in events in the Presevo valley, Kosovo's main Albanian political parties have tended to keep their distance, limiting comments to endorsing the UCPMB and insisting on their participation in any negotiations.

A Kosovo political analyst said the Presevo Albanians and the Serbian authorities were treading carefully, "trying to feel each other's pulse".

Reactions from the international community are being closely monitored, he said, in anticipation of talks, which could get underway "in early spring".

And judging by remarks made by the NATO Secretary-General, George Robertson, the alliance is keen to see talks take place at the earliest opportunity.

On February 15, Robertson urged the Presevo Albanians to begin negotiating with Belgrade to "build a balanced, long-term settlement".

The Albanian team in Veliki Trnavac included the UCPMB commander Shefket Musliu, president of the Presevo, Medvedja and Bujanovac political council, Jonuz Musliu, Halimi and president of the Party for Democratic Unity, Zeqirja Fazliu.

Leader of the Alliance for Kosovo's Future and a prominent former commander in the KLA, Ramush Haradinaj said the Belgrade plan did not contain enough elements to create mutual trust between the Albanians and the Serbian authorities. But he insisted there is a will in Kosovo to resolve the crisis by peaceful means.

Haradinaj welcomed moves to demilitarise the area, but noted, "The Serbian government continues to increase its military and police presence in Presevo valley". He pointed out that in the area around Medvedja, only 300 of the original 6,000 Albanian inhabitants remain.

One former Kosovo politician, who wished to remain anonymous, said he believed the Presevo situation could not be resolved without addressing the problem of Mitrovica at the same time.

Mitrovica is currently split in two by the Ibar River, with Serbs to the north and Albanians to the south.

"The crisis in North Mitrovica and the Presevo valley are like two sides of the same coin, " he said. " They have to be solved together, if we want stability in the region."

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Location: Serbia
Kosovo

Focus: Balkans: Regional Reporting & Sustainable
Training

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