

Serbs Defy Draft

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Hundreds of army reservists have taken to the streets of Kraljevo to protest against the Yugoslav government's latest draft.

Government officials sent to round-up army reservists in the Kraljevo area of central Serbia got more than they bargained for when they arrived in the village of Stubal.

About 200 protestors, upset by the death of three local men in the recent Kosovo conflict, met the officials with a barrage of insults and invective. "Red Gang! Go and Get Marko!" they shouted, referring to the son of Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic. "Fuck You Milosevic!" they chanted before driving the officials from the village with wooden staves.

The confrontation between the protesters, armed with sticks and agricultural tools, and the draft officials, accompanied by Yugoslav Army, VJ, officers, could easily have ended in tragedy.

One of the officials, Ljubinko Milojevic, said, "They wanted to hurt us. At one point I thought about pulling out a gun and shooting in the air. But we reached the car and left the village."

This latest call-up of reserve soldiers began seven days ago in central and southern Serbia, in the towns of Nis, Leskovac, Vranje, Kraljevo, Raska, Krusevac and Kursumlija.

Some observers have noted that the draft is affecting areas controlled by opposition political parties, particularly those areas, which received heating fuel from the European Union under last winter's "Energy for Democracy" programme.

General Nebojsa Pavkovic, chief of the VJ general staff, has denied reservists are being drafted, insisting they are being called-up for "regular training." The draftees, the majority of whom have already fought in Milosevic's wars, dismiss his claim, convinced they being mobilized for a new war.

Some believe they will be sent to southern Serbia to fight Albanian militants. Some think they'll be dispatched to Kosovo again to take on NATO forces and Kosovo Albanians. And some suspect they will be used to confront the Montenegrins.

But the willingness of reservists to take part in new military adventures has gone. In Kraljevo, a town where the opposition Serbian Renewal Movement and Democratic Party hold power, only 15 per cent of reservists have responded to the call-up.

"If they mobilize me now, it will be my fifth war," said Igor from Novi Selo. "I was in Croatia, Bosnia, and twice in in Kosovo. I was wounded twice, and I lost three friends. I don't know I can survive all this."

A Kraljevo mother, Dragica Pesic, watched her three sons go off to the war in Kosovo. After two days of intense worry, her husband Stojan joined up as a volunteer to be with his sons.

"I went insane with worry then," Dragica said. "Now they are drafting them again. The police came to our door and said my sons are deserters. I will not let them go. Where are they going? To fight their brothers in Montenegro? I've told them, if they decide to go again, they should bury me first."

Opposition to military service is much more open than last year. During the NATO bombing campaign parents hid their sons. Now protesters are prepared to confront the authorities.

On March 13, around 200 furious reservists descended on Kraljevo town centre to demand an explanation from the military. Kraljevo mayor, Mladimir Novakovic, said he tried to get someone from the VJ to talk to the protestors, to calm the situation. "No one in the army would admit they were in charge," he said.

The protestors sent a list of demands to the VJ general staff, calling for an immediate halt to the call-up of veterans from all the former Yugoslav wars and the demobilisation of those already drafted. All 200 reservists signed the attached petition.

The town's mayor has called an emergency session of the local assembly. "We will tell the regime not to drag our young men into their private wars ever again," Novakovic said. "If Milosevic really wants to go to war, he should do it alone with his police."

Pupils from the local high school, excused classes because of a strike by teachers, also lent their support to the protest.

Zoran, a final year pupil, said, "Tomorrow it will be our turn, these officials will draft us and fill coffins with our bodies. For that reason we want, while there is still time for us, to try and put a stop to this and any other draft."

Dusan Vukovic, whose only son died in Kosovo, called on the people of Kraljevo to continue defying the draft. He held Milosevic responsible for the death of his son and 75 other young Kraljevo recruits killed in Kosovo. "I wish him [Milosevic] the same fate as me - mourning clothes and no heirs."

Such is the scale of resistance to the call-up, the military authorities have called in the civilian police to help roundup draft-dodgers. And accusations of police brutality are adding to the sense of bitterness.

Dragan Nikolic, from a village west of Kraljevo, said four police officers arrived at his farm to collect his brother. "They fell on my brother, pushing him to the ground," he said. "Two other officers appeared from the backyard, tied him up and threw him into the back of the van like an animal."

Another reservist said he had responded to the call-up because he knew the police were arresting those who refused to come forward. He said that police had brought two men to his army barracks the day before, "Both were tied up and looked like they had been beaten."

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