

## **Skopje Drags Heels Over Amnesty**

**Author:** IWPR

The authorities in Skopje are stalling on a pledge to introduce an amnesty for ethnic Albanian fighters.

The omission of any explicit clause relating to the amnesty of ethnic Albanian fighters in the Macedonian peace accord could undermine the agreement. The fear is that unless a pardon is secured for all National Liberation Army, NLA, fighters, they will be hunted down after NATO forces leave the country.

Although President Boris Trajkovski has made it clear that pardoning fighters not guilty of war crimes is essential if peace is to be maintained, his prime minister Ljubco Georgievski is well-known for his opposition to letting ethnic Albanian fighters off the hook.

The Macedonians would not have signed the Ohrid Framework agreement if an amnesty for NLA fighters had been included. But Trajkovski, at the time, pledged that a pardon would be introduced once the peace deal was implemented. And now he is under international pressure to deliver on his promise.

"The more time that passes without an amnesty, the more ethnic Albanians are convinced that the Macedonian authorities are biding their time for a crackdown when NATO leaves," commented the International Crisis Group in a recent report.

"The question of amnesty is being unnecessarily dragged out by Georgievski," said Party of Democratic Prosperity, PDP, member, Naser Ziberi. "He behaves as if he never heard about this question, though the issue was discussed during Ohrid negotiations."

By arresting and convicting as many NLA fighters as he could in the period before the internationally-demanded amnesty agreement got implemented, Georgievski would win the support of a significant number of Macedonians who believe that this is the best NLA fighters deserve. With a general election expected early next year, the rewards of such a policy are self-evident.

Macedonians are particularly eager to have the heads of NLA leaders such as Ali Ahmeti, for whom the interior ministry has issued an international arrest warrant.

If the amnesty question is not settled, fighters will go to ground, arms not handed in and the threat of renewed conflict a distinct possibility. Sources close to the NLA told IWPR that many have already crossed over to Kosovo to evade capture. An armed ethnic Albanian force biding its time on the other side of the border would be a ticking bomb waiting to explode.

Some two-thirds of the estimated 3,300 NLA weapons have so far been collected under NATO's Essential Harvest programme. Many speculate, however, that the figure grossly underestimates the number of weapons in rebel hands.

Already, five members of the NLA have been sentenced to prison terms of eighteen months on charges of terrorism and "threats to constitutional order and security". Ethnic Albanians fear that many more of those involved in the conflict will go to jail. Even if an amnesty comes into effect it is unlikely that those already imprisoned will be released.

"The acquittal of NLA fighters who have not committed crimes is necessary to achieve reconciliation between the two ethnic communities," said Professor Vlado Popovski, an advisor to President Trajkovski, on August 17 during the Ohrid negotiations.

There is an appreciable majority of Macedonians, however, who reject the idea of pardoning people they prefer to see as terrorists. Professor of Criminal Law at Skopje University, Gorge Marijanovic said the West's insistence on an amnesty could result in those guilty of high treason, terrorism, armed rebellion and acts against the state being absolved. This, despite Trajkovski's insistence that there will be no pardon for NLA fighters who refuse to hand in their weapons nor those suspected of war crimes.

A senior source within the Macedonian government told IWPR that amnesty legislation would have to be passed before the conclusion of the disarmament process, to be effective. For this to happen, says the source, "the initiative would need to come from "a number of MPs from different parties". Which presently seems highly unlikely.

Since Georgievski would rather see the Ohrid agreement fail - having signed it with extreme reluctance, under international pressure - he won't be keen to drive any amnesty process. "I as a prime minister would not agree to the government presenting a draft law on the amnesty for the terrorists who committed crimes against the Macedonian people," he said on September 1.

Despite the fact both president and premier are being accused of dragging their heels, the political leader of the NLA, Ali Ahmeti, in one of his rare interviews for the Macedonian media (Telma TV, August 25), said that he was certain that he would be pardoned because, he said, he had not ordered any of the several massacres of the Macedonian soldiers which are considered as war crimes. "I am on Macedonian soil and soon you will be able to see me in Skopje," Ahmeti said.

The pardoning of the NLA soldiers remains an extremely controversial and highly emotional topic in Macedonia. Some individuals involved in the peace process refuse to comment on it, probably fearful of provoking adverse public reaction from the Macedonians who already feel that the "murderers of Macedonia's defenders" have been let off lightly so far.

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