

Skopje Talks Given Fresh Impetus

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A sense of optimism returns to Macedonia as international officials say peace talks are "back on track".

The lobby of the Alexander Palace Hotel in Skopje was packed yesterday with journalists waiting for the outcome of the latest round of high-level talks aimed at finding a political solution to Macedonia's on-going crisis.

NATO secretary-general George Robertson, European Union high representative Javier Solana, leaders of the Macedonian and Albanian parliamentary parties and Macedonian president Boris Trajkovski had been cooped up for hours.

By late afternoon, in an effort to ease the tension with some black humour, reporters were placing bets on whether the meeting would lead to peace or war.

Five months into the crisis, Macedonia is at the crossroads and the country's political leaders must now choose between peace and conflict.

"We came worried but now we are more optimistic," said Solana after the meeting. "The political process is back on track. The cease-fire is back on track." Robertson also expressed hope that in the coming days a solution would be found.

Talks now move to Tetovo, a town in the north-western part of Macedonia that in the last five months has endured fierce clashes between government security forces and the Albanian guerrillas of the National Liberation Army, NLA.

During the last five days, most of Tetovo's 35,000 Macedonian inhabitants have fled their homes after renewed fighting and pressure from the NLA. Those from villages around the town were also terrorised into fleeing the area. An estimated 10,000 to 15,000 people were affected. Families were separated and some 30 or 40 people taken hostage.

The decision to move the talks to Tetovo was made possible after NATO special envoy to Macedonia, Ambassador Peter Feith, reached an agreement with NLA political leader Ali Ahmeti, in Prizren, Kosovo, on July 25. On Ahmeti's orders, the rebels withdrew to positions outside Tetovo and agreed to respect a cease-fire signed earlier this month by the Macedonian security forces and the Albanian fighters.

According to Trajkovski, 95 per cent of the text of the agreement has been agreed. The remainder mainly concerns the use of the Albanian language as a second official language in areas of the country where the community makes up at least a fifth of the population.

The proposal met with almost hysterical hostility from Macedonian political parties, which interpreted the measure as "language federalisation". Meanwhile, the Albanians insisted there could be no compromise on the issue, especially as they had already given ground on all other political demands - for example they had dropped calls for a declaration that Albanians form a second constitutive nation, for consensual democracy and for an ethnic Albanian vice-president with a right of veto.

Solana and Robertson have directed most pressure during these latest talks towards the Macedonian political parties. However, according to a anonymous Western diplomat close to IWPR, certain flexibility is still needed from the leaders of the Albanian parties on the language issue.

President Trajkovski is keen to see the 20 per cent mechanism spread to other ethnic groups, such as areas inhabited by Turks, thereby emphasising that Macedonia is a multi-national country and not just a nation of ethnic Albanians and Macedonians.

In essence, the final draft is unlikely to vary much from that on the table now. Diplomats are busy working out a wording acceptable to all sides, which would enable political leaders to satisfy their respective audiences - audiences they are clearly afraid of.

Solana and Robertson know there is no recipe to ensure everybody is hailed as national heroes.

"The leaders in this country have to be real leaders because real leaders are not those who follow," said the latter, pinpointing one of the core reasons why the country now finds itself in crisis.

If the negotiations fail and the military option wins the day, Macedonia will be the first country in the history of humanity to go to war over a linguistic dispute, said DPA leader Arben Xhaferi.

If the country's leaders genuinely seek a political solution, it is within reach - and the NATO operation to disarm the NLA could begin immediately.

The only question is whether all the leaders present at the talks really want a political solution. There are numerous indications that some are trying to provoke armed conflict. Military honours could hide the corruption and financial scandals dogging part of the Macedonian political hierarchy.

The same could be said for Albanian politicians - men worried about their political futures and to whom peace would not bring much good. Such tendencies pose a serious threat to the negotiating process.

Among the journalists betting on the outcome of the talks, I put my money on peace. The people in this country don't want war. A look at the experience of our neighbours and a lack of any real motive, prevents most from signing up to the military option. After all, as Robertson pointed out, civil war would produce no winners, only thousands upon thousands of victims.

Another reason for hope is the fact that the international community simply cannot allow security complications of such magnitude in the region. If pushed they'll turn to Plan B - an international conference on Macedonia which, in the best case scenario, would turn Macedonia into a federal international protectorate.

In the end, the country's political leaders must face up to reality and next week find the flexibility needed to secure a final agreement. This would surely not be the end of the story, but would certainly close a dark chapter in the country's history.

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