

South Serbia Deal Key to Stability

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By laying down their arms, the UCPMB will send a message that their fight was for rights and not a change in borders.

The conflict in the Presevo valley could very well be coming to an end. Already, hundreds of ethnic Albanian fighters have laid down their weapons with many more expected to do the same by May 24.

This is the deadline NATO has set for a cessation of hostilities in the region. The same day Yugoslav troops enter the last sector of the buffer zone set up between southern Serbia and Kosovo following the 1999 conflict.

NATO forces have guaranteed the safety and amnesty of guerrillas who surrender their weapons by the agreed deadline, thus ending their 16-month campaign.

Leaders of the Liberation Army of Presevo, Medvedja and Bujanovac, UCPMB, seem to be taking advantage of the amnesty as support for their cause both inside and outside Kosovo has waned to almost zero.

Although some of the more militant units may hold out, two of the most prominent leaders have announced they'll be ordering their men to lay down their weapons, joining the 200 who have already surrendered.

Shefqet Musliu said his units would be demobilised by May 31. This, according to Pristina daily Koha Ditore, was followed by a similar statement by ex-UCPMB commander Muhamet Xhemajli on Monday.

Nicknamed 'Rebel', Xhemajli's statement shocked many, as just last week he told journalists that he had vowed to fight on.

Ever since they took up arms, the UCPMB's several thousand fighters have been divided about their aims for the area, which has an ethnic Albanian majority.

Local political leaders said repeatedly that they were fighting for the recognition of ethnic Albanian rights, but more radical elements have been looking to annex the area to Kosovo.

Another faction has stated its desire to strike a deal whereby Belgrade would recognise the autonomy of the three enclaves of Presevo, Medvedja and Bujanovac in exchange for recognition of Serb majority areas in northern Kosovo.

The reality now is that by the end of this week Yugoslav forces will have reoccupied Sector 'B', the last remaining section of the buffer zone.

Feeling in the area is divided about the way the affair has panned out. No-one is entirely happy though most accept the situation. They express hope that the lot of the average Albanian will improve, that at least things will not be as bad as under the Milosevic regime.

A few thousand, concerned about possible conflict between hardcore fighters and the Yugoslav army, have headed over the border into Kosovo.

Die-hard Albanian fighters can expect to receive little support. Since NATO reversed its policy regarding the insurgents, support from within the region has dampened considerably.

When Milosevic was still in power the West turned a blind-eye to the activities of the guerrillas in the Presevo valley, but since his fall from power they have veered from this position, going so far as to brand them "terrorists".

Since then, Kosovans themselves, mindful of their international image, are no longer of one mind on the UCPMB struggle. With international focus very much on Macedonia, Presevo has been out of the spotlight and seen more as a trying problem in need of a quick-fix solution.

Neither is it in the interests of the Pristina leadership to be seen in sympathy with UCPMB aims any more.

Kosovan political leaders are more interested in pushing ahead with securing the best future for their people within Kosovo proper. Presevo detracts from this, and besides, most accept that nothing more can be done there.

Besides seeing the Presevo as a hopeless cause, any further conflict in the area could be potentially damaging to the Albanian cause in Kosovo and Macedonia.

Since the eruption of violence in Macedonia, the whole issue of ethnic Albanians attempting to shift borders has become an extremely sensitive one, especially for those in Macedonia fighting for equal rights and greater political representation.

Many Macedonians, fearing ethnic Albanian separatism in their own country, have pointed to Presevo, arguing that insurgency in the region is part and parcel of the same struggle.

Any stabilisation of the situation in Kosovo would greatly aid the cause of Albanians in Macedonia by pulling the plug on the 'Greater Albania' bug-bear.

By laying down their arms, the UCPMB will send a message that their fight was for rights and not a change in borders. This would help the international community bring pressure on the Macedonian government to come to an agreement with its own ethnic Albanian population.

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