

South Serbia Tensions Ease

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Kostunica intervenes to help avert an escalation in violence between the Serbian forces and Albanian rebels in the south of the country

Tensions are easing in the south of Serbia where bloody clashes between ethnic Albanian guerrillas and Serbian police prompted an escalating series of ultimatums and the sudden departure of hundreds of civilians from the area.

Astute diplomacy by Yugoslav President Vojislav Kostunica during an official visit to Vienna and intervention by K-For troops on the ground to extend an earlier ceasefire appear to have staved off an imminent crisis in Presevo, Medveda and Bujanovac, three ethnic Albanian districts just outside the administrative borders of Kosovo.

Members of the ethnic Albanian rebel Liberation Army for Presevo, Medvedja and Bujanovac, UPCMB, had been digging in positions in preparation for an attack by Yugoslav forces following the clashes last week in which four Serbian policemen were killed.

General Vladimir Lazarevic, considered part of the hard line faction of the federal defence forces, has told Kostunica that the military is ready to confront the Albanian rebel groups and warned inaction will encourage them to penetrate even further into Serbia.

"We have plans to neutralise the terrorist groups," said an army officer stationed in the south of Serbia. "We have to act because ordinary policemen are no match for the Albanian gangs who are armed with missile launchers and mortars."

Serbian police and Yugoslav army units have already begun to mass in the Bujanovac area, according to eyewitness reports. They say United States helicopter gun ships are visible in the area apparently monitoring the movements of the Serbian forces.

Belgrade had earlier set a deadline for the armed guerrillas to leave the area but Kostunica - in an appeal to NATO and the international community - later tempered this to an urgent request that K-For troops do all they can to prevent the rebels from operating lest the situation "set the whole region ablaze."

The Yugoslav army and the new authorities in Serbia currently face a major challenge. Recent weeks have seen a sudden escalation of violence in the area. Apart from the dead and wounded, the Albanian guerrillas have taken control of points near Dobrosin and Lucane, villages close to the border with Kosovo. The UCPBM has been operating for over a year now.

Such developments have placed the leaders of the Democratic Opposition of Serbia, DOS, in an unenviable situation ahead of the elections scheduled for December 23. Slobodan Milosevic's party, the Socialist Party of Serbia, has been playing up these events in its campaign. It claims that DOS is not protecting Serbians in the area and has caused the trouble by what the SPS calls the opponents' "treasonous" policy.

It's a ploy that might work. Initial opinion polls indicate that the majority of the inhabitants of Serbia are embittered by the current situation.

Consequently, DOS must quickly demonstrate its readiness to protect Serbian territory while simultaneously avoiding any action that would undermine its good relations with the international community.

DOS is hoping that it can push the NATO-led K-For troops in Kosovo to solve the problem and thereby keep the threat of a possible violent Serbian response in the background. After all, Kostunica doesn't want to find himself depicted as a latter day Milosevic - quick to resort to excessive force against anyone standing in his way.

Some believe that the UCPBM is trying to trigger a major overreaction by the Serbians that would lead to confrontation with NATO forces in an effort to undermine the on-going delicate negotiations between DOS leaders and the international community.

If the guerrillas are not neutralised in some way, one should not rule out the possibility the pressure of public opinion in Serbia could force Kostunica to resort to the use of force.

But so far, Kostunica appears to have played his cards right. After writing to NATO chief George Robertson and UN Secretary General Kofi Annan pressing for action and pointing out that Serbia was sticking to a security agreement for the zone, which totally ties its hands, he received a series of welcome responses.

Within 24 hours both NATO and the UN supported Belgrade, and the violence in southern Serbia was condemned by the OSCE, as well as the majority of Western countries and Russia. French President Jacques Chirac referred to the ethnic Albanian attacks as "terrorism".

Robertson told Kostunica that K-For would undertake additional measures to secure the border region and launched an investigation into the latest incidents.

The June 1999 Military Technical Agreement, MTA, with NATO prohibits Yugoslavia from patrolling a five-kilometre (three-mile) zone along the Kosovo-Serbian border with anything other than lightly armed police.

"It is crystal clear that K-For and UNMIK (the UN administration in Kosovo) have failed to do their part of the job properly," Kostunica told reporters in Vienna where he addressed the OSCE.

NATO sources said Kostunica's letter was not an ultimatum threatening unilateral action, but urged peacekeepers to do more on their side of the boundary. "It was engaging us, in temperate terms, and we see that as positive," an alliance source said.

Ethnic Albanians in the zone meanwhile said they had agreed to a request from US peacekeepers whose tanks overlook the valley that a limited ceasefire be extended until Friday.

Diplomats pointed out that when the rules were fixed, Serbian security forces were seen as a threat to peacekeepers and no one foresaw Albanian separatists exploiting the security zone. Kostunica said the situation today highlighted a "serious ambiguity" in the agreement that he hoped would be overcome.

Meanwhile, in a move Western governments are sure to appreciate, DOS police minister, Boza Prelevic, pledged that he would not repeat the mistakes of Milosevic's regime by responding to the guerrillas with a disproportionate use of force. "The police will not turn this into the international incident sought by the Albanian terrorists," he said.

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Location: Stavropol
Serbia
Russia
North Ossetia

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