

Spring Comes To Kosovo

Author: [Gjeraqhina Tuhina](#)

As many people feared, spring has brought an increase in the fighting and a new humanitarian crisis to Kosovo.

Despite widespread expectations here and elsewhere, Rambouillet did not turn out to be a second Dayton. The end of the talks brought something else entirely: a new influx of refugees, new firefights and lots of new bodies.

Fighting began in the southern part of Kosovo as the talks were breaking up, leaving many casualties on both sides and forcing thousands of ethnic Albanians to head for Macedonia. Those refugees without papers were left to camp out on the wrong side of the border.

International special envoys for Kosovo, Christopher Hill and Wolfgang Petrich, used this latest humanitarian tragedy to underline the critical need for Kosovo to have an "international military presence, which would guarantee the implementation of an agreement". While up until very recently, all the talk was of NATO troops, Hill, Petrich, and Knut Vollebek, chairman of the OSCE, have all repeated the phrase first used in the days after Rambouillet by US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright: "NATO-led troops".

Belgrade still rejects any kind of military presence, as Vollebek reminded reporters during his visit this week in Pristina. He could only state that troops would eventually be dispatched. Meanwhile, reports from Albanian sources claim that more Serbian troops with heavy artillery have entered Kosovo. The verification mission has complained that the "Yugoslav army has gone far beyond the technical violations of the Kosovo cease-fire agreement" and that these violations "have already become... routine".

While Belgrade claims its forces are engaged in routine winter exercises, an OSCE spokesman reported the arrival of "20 Yugoslav army companies, of around 150 men each, with all armed support... six times more than the cease-fire limit". Most of them were said to be heading for the Macedonian border.

While the worst of the fighting is currently taking place in the south, the west and north of Kosovo are still not quiet. Every day reports come in of sporadic shootings, shelling and of abducted people turning up dead. Serb sources sometimes report attacks on military forces. "We are spending all our time preventing skirmishes escalating into fresh fighting rather than verifying the cease-fire", said one international verifier.

Back down by the border, and more refugees are going in Macedonia, leaving thousands more unable to pass through. Claiming that they "don't dare to go back home, until someone from abroad guarantees that Serbs won't touch [them] anymore", these ethnic Albanians from the southern part of province, now live in the woods and sleep under plastic tents. Moreover, they really seem to mean it. "We're gonna stay here, in the open, until we see armed foreigners walking around our villages and preventing new attacks" said one 68-year old man who claims to have slept in the woods outside the village of Gajre for a week. He was sure, he said, that his time there would not be counted in days...

And so it seems that the warning given last year by US special envoy, Richard Holbrooke, that "we should be afraid of the spring in Kosovo" because it would bring new fighting with it, appears to be ringing true. Spring has arrived here in Kosovo...

Gjeraqhina Tuhina is a Pristina-based journalist with Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty.

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