

THE TIMES 12/7/97 p 10

Flame of Albanian unrest threatens Macedonian tinderbox

FROM JAMES PETTIFER
IN TETOVO

TENSION gripped western Macedonia yesterday with frequent roadblocks and a heavy special forces presence after an outbreak of violence which left two young ethnic Albanians dead and 40 people with serious gunshot wounds.

More than 200 people were taken to hospital after fighting broke out in the normally quiet Islamic town of

Gostivar near here on Wednesday. Rifi Osmani, the newly-elected radical Mayor, has been arrested and accused of inciting the violence.

About a quarter of the population of Macedonia, long regarded as the tinderbox of the southern Balkans, are ethnic Albanians, most of whom live in traditional Muslim communities in the western mountains. Since the fall of communism, the border with Albania has been opened, and links renewed. At the same time,

nationalist feelings in these communities has grown.

A dispute about the right to fly the Albanian flag erupted when US-trained Macedonian special forces moved into the town with armoured vehicles at about 3am on Wednesday, surrounded the town hall, and broke into it.

Five hours later an angry Albanian crowd gathered and tried to eject them. Scuffles broke out, followed by bursts of gunfire. The Macedonian

version reported on television yesterday claimed the special forces "were helping people who were being attacked by terrorists".

What is indisputable in the fog of claims and counterclaims is that Albanians also used weapons, possibly brought across the border, and that disturbances continued all day.

Although the Macedonian action has succeeded in stopping for the time being what is seen as a secessionist movement, there will be

a heavy price to pay in community relations. The Albanians are sufficiently numerous to have a right of veto over the future of the state. The use of weapons by both sides must reinforce the West's fears of the spread of violence from Albania.

As far as can be established, units of the United Nations peacekeeping force based in Tetovo did not play any part in the events. Yesterday they appeared to be confined to barracks in the town.

