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Greek troops give poetic Albanian rebels wide berth

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GREEK troops yesterday delayed their entry into the anarchic southern Albanian port of Vlore, after warnings from an Italian exploratory mission that they had been confronted by local warlords.

The transport ship *Samos*, with 130 troops and 34 vehicles on board, diverted north and docked at Durres, which is safely under multinational control. Last night the Greeks drove south and made a temporary base in Fier, just north of Vlore, to await instructions from Operation Alba's Italian commander.

The leader of Vlore's self-proclaimed Committee for Public Salvation, Albert Shite, was surprised by the Greeks' decision, assuring them that they "are welcome here according to our tradition of hospitality". It seems, however, that it was this same traditional hospitality — a gun-toting gang met the Italians 24 hours earlier — which persuaded the two colonels to divert to Durres. The Greeks also claimed that the approach channels to Vlore harbour were choked by shipwrecks.

The citizens of Vlore, who were badly affected by the failed pyramid investment schemes, remain insistent that their town will remain outside the Government's control as long as President Berisha — whom they blame for the loss of their life savings — stays in power.

Mr Shite, a 26-year-old resembling a young Bruce Springsteen, the American rock star, gathers his commit-



Tom Walker in Vlore reports how a "traditional" welcome from revolutionaries toting guns and verse was avoided

tee each day in a school building on Vlore's ruined boulevard. Journalists are excluded but the angry deliberations can easily be heard through the door: yesterday's session calmed down only after one member of the committee stood and read a poem that he had composed denouncing Mr Berisha.

Resplendent in a black padded top with imitation fur hood, drainpipe jeans and winkle-pickers, Mr Shite then drove his green Mercedes to Vlore's independence monument, where he addressed a crowd that was largely male, elderly and angry, reminding them not to harm foreign troops. The committee's resident poet then read another few stanzas, highly critical of the Italian Navy and the President, which sparked a hearty rendition of "Down with Berisha!"

"That's all the material the committee has for you today," Mr Shite said. "Please come back tomorrow." After receiving pavement plaudits, Mr Shite was ready to meet the press.

A former import-export trader with business interests in Greece, he said he had been "distinguished from other intellectuals" after he spoke on

Vlore's private television station. "I didn't choose politics and I do not belong to any political party," he said.

Mr Shite added that the residents of Vlore would put down their weapons only after Mr Berisha resigned. He urged the President not to contemplate sending in his own security forces under the cover of Operation Alba in an attempt to control Vlore. "If these troops could have among them armed elements of Sali Berisha, then this would cause a civil war in Albania."

Charming and with a distinct lack of the machismo displayed by other rebel leaders, Mr Shite said he simply wanted some of his money back to start in business again. "I have lost all my security in life," he said.

□ **Tirana:** Leka Zog, the son of Albania's last monarch, said yesterday that Mr Berisha had agreed to hold a referendum asking Albanians whether they want to restore the monarchy 58 years after King Zog fled the country. Leka Zog, who wants to resume the monarchy as King Leka Zog I, said the political parties and Mr Berisha would have to determine the timing of the vote. (Reuter)