

Resigning would be too easy, says Berisha

PRESIDENT BERISHA has said he cannot guarantee the safety of aid convoys coming to Albania.

In an interview with *The Times*, the President reiterated his appeal for a small multinational force, and said he had considered resigning during the height of his country's crisis, but that it would have been "too easy."

As European Union governments work out the logistics of sending aid, Mr Berisha admitted that looting and banditry would be a major hazard to any humanitarian operation. "I could not say that international convoys would be safe on our territory for the moment, and they must have full security."

But Mr Berisha rejected Nato studies suggesting Albania needed a Bosnia-style force, and said any military intervention would be required for the short term only. In the longer perspective he requested EU technical assistance in rebuilding the country's police force and legal structures.

"Despite what happened we are a European nation, one of the oldest of the Western world and we must have our place there," he said.

His interview capped a weekend in which he threw open his doors to the international press, after a tantalising silence and growing rumours about his health. "I never once thought of being closed to the media," he said against the cackle of machinegun fire in the darkness outside.



Albania needs a multinational force to rebuild legal structures, the beleaguered President tells Tom Walker in Tirana

His most uncomfortable moment came when he realised that his Socialist opponents had to be involved more in the efforts to stave off war, and he announced a new cross-party Government. "Only on the day when I offered the national reconciliation platform was I thinking to resign, but this was too easy," he said. "I asked myself, could I do more — could I do something above this platform and save the country from civil

snap election to a new five-year term in office by a rubber-stamp parliament was inflammatory. He would abide by the constitution and elections, he said. "Presidential coups are for Latin America, not here."

If he left office, he ruled out a return to his former career as a cardiologist. "Nine or ten years ago I decided to leave my profession. It was one of the most painful moments for me," he said. "Since then I

colleagues, whatever the price we must pay, we must cut down these pyramids. We must get the country out of this hell. I never felt afraid."

In his few moments of relaxation, President Berisha told of a liking for books, most of all the works of Dostoevsky and Hemingway. *Crime and Punishment* struck a particular chord. "Physicians are more able to understand that book because of the characters."

Unlike Enver Hoxha, his predecessor at the helm of Albania, the President does not wish to write his version of history. "I don't like memoirs, because almost all people who write memoirs, they write things in their favour. I have read a lot of them and I don't like them."

A northern Albanian from shepherd stock, Mr Berisha said that when the storm has passed, he will head for his native highlands. "I will just walk — this is my holiday," he said. "I go up, to get trained. I like very much mountains."

Although his children are interested in politics, he ruled out a Berisha dynasty. And as for guidance during the past calamitous weeks, the Albanian President confessed that an unseen hand had helped to forge the new Government. "I don't practise but I am a believer. I definitely believe that God helped me."

Mr Berisha said he drew inspiration from Winston Churchill. "He was a genius. His greatest moments were in Cabinet; he knew how to act."

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war?" Mr Berisha insisted he enjoyed nationwide support, and that southern Albanians held no grudge against him because of the pyramid fund fiasco that has thrown economic development back a decade.

"I am deeply convinced I have friends in the South. There is a silent majority in Albania," he said. "I was in Gjirokastr two weeks ago and I had the warmest reception."

Mr Berisha denied that his

have never practised, and in cardiology I was using some very fine techniques and practice is essential. I could never do it again."

Was the President tired after a harrowing three weeks? "Since my youth until now I have always worked until midnight or one o'clock. I have not changed because I became President. I was always like that."

Did he ever feel in danger as mob rule spread, often demanding his head? "I told my



Berisha: "I am convinced I have friends in the South... there is a silent majority"

Shots as Italy halts influx of migrants

FROM RICHARD OWEN
IN ROME

AFTER nearly two weeks of giving shelter to thousands of Albanians fleeing across the Adriatic, Italy yesterday announced that it would turn back boats from Albania, citing "growing evidence" that many of those trying to enter were not genuine refugees but illegal immigrants.

There was immediate tension over the new policy, with shots fired at Italian coastguards from an Albanian fishing boat just off Brindisi while it was being towed back out to sea.

The fishing boat, carrying a hundred Albanians, was boarded by armed police and taken into Brindisi, where the Albanian captain was arrested. Captain Giovanni Biso, the coastguard commander at Brindisi, said from now on any refugees reaching the southern Italian ports would be treated as illegal immigrants.

The mood in Italy, initially sympathetic to the refugees, has hardened noticeably. An Interior Ministry spokesman said many recent arrivals were from areas "which have not even been touched by the revolt".

After a lull over the weekend, the flood of Albanians resumed yesterday. Nearly a thousand arrived at Brindisi and other ports before the ban was imposed. Authorities conceded that the policy would be difficult to enforce.

MICHAEL LECKEL / REUTERS