

## Europe to act on humanitarian crisis

## EU plans security mission in Albania

John Palmer in Brussels and Foreign Staff

**A** COALITION of European Union countries, led by Italy, is ready to deploy 6,000 troops and police to protect a huge international humanitarian mission in Albania.

After the Albanian government warned that food reserves could be exhausted in 10 days, EU foreign ministers meeting in Brussels gave cautious blessing to such a mission if it proves necessary to create a secure environment for the safe provision of international assistance.

The move came as Italy decided to turn away boats bringing a flood of Albanians to its ports amid mounting evidence that Albanians who have set out to reach Italy in the past two days are no longer genuine refugees from social unrest but illegal immigrants looking for a better life.

The bulk of the troops and police for the mission will be provided by Italy but there may also be contingents from France, Greece, Spain, Austria, Denmark and the Netherlands.

"Under there is a coalition of the willing which is now ready to provide forces to protect the aid givers," said the Dutch foreign minister, Hans van Mierlo, who chaired yesterday's meeting. France is ready to support such a security mission to Albania, the French foreign minister, Bernard Charrette, declared.

The mandate for the force will only be decided after further consultation with the authorities in Tirana. But last night EU diplomats said it might be used to secure the Adriatic port of Durres and the airport in Tirana. It may also be used to help to defend EU and international aid missions and to work with the Albanian army and police to

protect food and medical supplies. Italy flew in supplies to Albania yesterday.

Last night EU foreign ministers stressed that the mixed military and police force was not designed to keep the peace between the Albanian factions but to support the army and police. "This is not a peacekeeping mission, let alone a peace enforcement operation. What we are talking about is primarily a mission to secure the distribution of food and other supplies which are urgently needed by the people of Albania," one EU diplomat said.

Britain and Germany, who both have peacekeeping troops deployed in the former Yugoslavia, said last night that they would not be taking part. "No one is talking any longer about military intervention in the Albanian political situation," the Foreign Secretary, Malcolm Rifkind, said. "I accept that there may be the need for a force to protect aid organisations, although the International Red Cross has said it does not want military protection."

Other EU foreign ministers spoke of the force being planned as an example of the "a coalition of the willing" foreseen for other European security missions in future. The European Commission, which will coordinate aid distribution, has already positioned supplies of food and medicine in Italy and Bosnia. "Once we have secure routes for delivering the aid, we could get it into the country within 24 or 48 hours," one Commission official said last night.

EU foreign ministers said that the Union would also help to re-establish "a viable police force".

When the EU foreign ministers reassemble in Rome today to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the European Community, they will be joined by the Albanian prime minister, Bashkim Fino.



Police with sniffer dogs search Albanian exiles as they arrive in the southern Italian port of Brindisi, amid growing fears that many are not genuine refugees from the country's political turmoil

PHOTOGRAPH PIER PAOLO CITO

## Italy fears influx will set back war on Mafia

The exodus is fuelling unease about the *cosa nostra's* links with a new breed of Balkan gangster, reports **Helena Smith** in Brindisi

**I**N THE chaotic port of Brindisi the first taste of Italy's refugees is a body afloat in the presence of a sniffer dog before they set one foot on the quayside.

Guided by the belief that hundreds of hardened criminals have muscled in on the exodus, the Italian state security machine is working overtime. There are fears that, with convicts on the run across Albania after prisons were thrown open by rioters, it is only a matter of time before organised crime increases in Italy.

In places such as Brindisi, where reception centres are overflowing the fears have

created a backlash of ill-feeling towards the Albanians.

Highlighting the fears, anti-Mafia judges from around Italy met in Bari, the administrative centre of the southern Puglia region, to discuss the growing links between Albanian and local gangsters. There is concern that, with many Albanians also landing unchecked in isolated coves, the exodus will set back "by years" the progress made in tackling organised crime.

Cataldo Motta, the district's assistant state prosecutor, said: "Albanian criminals have infiltrated rival groups in the Puglia Mafia, which means that they do pose a serious threat. In Milan they

have become so powerful running prostitution rackets that they have even taken over the Calabrians in strength and influence."

Mr Motta believes that, under the auspices of Italy's Mafia, Albanian "delinquents" have become increasingly well organised.

Since the collapse of communism in 1991, gangsters in the two countries have worked closely, trafficking drugs and people across the narrow strait dividing them.

When Albania opened up after more than 40 years of isolation under the late tyrant Enver Hoxha, its impoverished mountain villagers began cultivating marijuana.

Sensing a financial opportunity, drug dealers from Italy, Germany and Greece showed them how to sow the seed.

With Albania's dry, temperate climate, the crop has fared so well that narcotics specialists have begun to liken the country to Colombia.

Last year under pressure from the West, Albania's president, Sali Berisha, passed tough legislation to clamp down on the trade. Stiff penalties were introduced.

"It was part of the reason why the government became so unpopular," said Agim Neza, the spokesman at the Albanian justice ministry in the new "national unity" government. "A lot of drug money was poured into the pyramid schemes."

Even before the tiny Balkan state descended into anarchy with the collapse of the

schemes, corrupt officials ensured that the trade flourished.

In the last eight months of 1996 alone, Italian police confiscated about 3,000 kilograms from Albanians caught shipping the drug across the strait in high-speed launches.

"There was an enormous increase in the amount of marijuana being brought into Italy last year," Mr Motta said.

Italian intelligence sources say the symbiotic relationship between the criminal groups recently expanded with the establishment of coca plantations in the rolling hills around Albania's borders with Greece. The Sicilian Mafia, with the support of Colombians, is believed to have set up the plantations.

"This is particularly serious because both the Sicilians and Colombians are

extremely well organised when it comes to crime," said Mr Motta.

Albanian gangsters have started trafficking heroin to Europe from Bulgaria, Turkey and neighbouring Macedonia in collaboration with Russian and Chinese criminal syndicates.

The prosecutor attributes the spiralling strength of Puglia's own Mafia to its ties with the Albanians. He believes the trafficking of looted arms from Albania will fuel organised crime.

"We are afraid that many of these arms are already being stashed in secret hiding places along the Albanian coast," Mr Motta said. "Kalashnikovs are apparently being sold in Albania for three dollars each. This really is a very big danger that we in Italy are all drawing."