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Albanians stop short of declaring breakaway state

FROM TOM WALKER IN TIRANA

ALBANIA'S southern rebels yesterday stopped short of declaring an independent republic, staving off the country's slide towards a north-south conflict.

Sources close to the rebels' leader, Agim Goxhita, said a meeting of southern leaders had reiterated the demand for President Berisha's resignation. They also said that the post of President should be replaced by a presidential council. However, there was no mention of military action against the north, and the rebel council said it recognised the government of Bashkim Fino, the Prime Minister, on condition that he formally distances himself from the President. The council also

demanding that Mr Berisha's grip on the media be broken and that state television be put under the control of the new Government.

There was no official reaction to the meeting yesterday in Tirana, but sources in the Government applauded the rebels' conciliatory tone. "It's a step forward," said one opposition chief of Cabinet. "You cannot interpret this in any way as being an attempt to create an autonomous southern republic." However, much of the Albanian political class in Tirana is sceptical about how representative the rebel committee in the south, and its northern counterpart, are. "There is an influence of people who have lost money,

then there are foreign, mainly Greek, interests, and finally you have army officers," said Zef Preci, of the Albanian Centre for Economic Research. He said the danger of a Greek minority-inspired breakaway republic was very much alive.

□ **Orphans moved:** The children rescued from Elbasan were yesterday moved to a block of flats near the British Embassy in Tirana, where they are being looked after by Mike and Judy Smith, their British "Home of Hope" guardians.

An embassy spokesman said the orphans were in good spirits, and had recovered from the shock of their dramatic midnight drive to safety.

Residents averted nuclear disaster

BY TOM WALKER

HUNDREDS of Albanian looters are at large with radioactive military materials, oblivious of the threat to their own health and posing a new problem for Italian authorities struggling to deal with the refugee influx.

Robert Kushe, the director of the Albanian Institute for Nuclear Physics, said yesterday that a nuclear disaster in the northern suburbs of Tirana was averted last week only by the vigilance of local residents, who fought off drunken gangs intent on ransacking the institute.

The building's central laboratory contains a lead-protected pencil of the radioactive isotope caesium 137. "Any person who would have taken this would have been dead within minutes, but the biggest potential danger was fire," Mr Kushe said. "The lead would have melted and the whole area around would have been contaminated."

When looters arrived at the institute last Thursday night, local residents who knew of its deadly contents sprang to the rescue. Perparim Bastari, who lives near by, "We told them they would kill themselves and they didn't believe us. But we had enough guns and we were strong."

Elsewhere, looters of military barracks and stores have made off with an unknown quantity of Soviet and Chinese-made radiometers, containing dangerous quantities of the isotopes cobalt 60 and strontium 85. "Anyone with one of these in his pocket has a problem," Mr Kushe said.