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Flood of refugees overwhelms southern Italy

By RICHARD OWEN

AS THE number of Albanians fleeing across the Adriatic to Italy swelled to more than 6,000 yesterday, Italian coastguards mounted a rescue operation to pluck to safety 900 refugees clinging to a stricken Albanian naval ship sinking 20 miles from the Italian coast.

Southern Italy is being overwhelmed by an exodus of desperate refugees crossing the 40 miles from Albania in a makeshift flotilla of leaking, rusty and overcrowded boats. Many sag perilously close to the waterline, their decks packed with cold, starving

men, women and children, the men carrying a few belongings, the women carrying bundled-up babies.

Admiral Renato Ferraro, head of the coastguard, said most of the 900 rescued passengers had been transferred to an Italian tug and taken to Bari. All were safe. But Italian marines had to be put on the tug to keep order when scuffles broke out, he said. The refugees had set out from Vlore, but after 20 hours at sea their ship had a broken rudder and had run out of fuel. It was about to sink when the coastguards arrived.

In a bizarre twist, Italian naval helicopters yesterday

flew 36 Albanians who had asked to be repatriated back to Tirana, including, according to unconfirmed reports, President Berisha's 19-year-old son, who fled to Italy last week. But hundreds more made the hazardous crossing to Italy and the hard-pressed authorities at Brindisi declared the port closed, arresting Albanian crews who brought refugees in.

Andrea Gentile, the city's chief of police, said all reception centres were full. Those still streaming across from Albania will be directed to other southern ports, but they, too, are at bursting point. Giorgio Napolitano, the Inte-

rior Minister, said Italy was braced for a huge influx of refugees.

On Sunday, another Albanian naval vessel carrying nearly 900 refugees, some clinging to her sides and masts, ran aground two miles southwest of Brindisi. The refugees on board, including a heavily pregnant woman and a newborn baby, had to be rescued by helicopters and coastguards operating in heavy seas. Some Albanians jumped into the bitterly cold water to swim ashore and were not seen again.

Romano Prodi, the Prime Minister, flew to Brindisi for talks. The authorities an-

nounced later that a "tent city" would be set up at Bari military airport for the refugees, nearly all destitute and, in many cases, without identification papers.

In the meantime refugees in Brindisi, Bari, Otranto and Lecce are being housed in church halls, barracks, hotels and schools, with the Roman Catholic charity Caritas providing clothing and food. "The situation is very grave," the Archbishop of Lecce, Mgr Cosmo Francesco Lupi, said. Some refugees are being transferred to central Italian towns and boatloads of Albanians have arrived at ports as far north as Ravenna.



Refugees wave after being rescued from a sinking vessel by Italian coastguard helicopters

Freed opposition leader aims to topple Berisha in fair elections



Nano: wants Albanians to resolve crisis

FROM TOM WALKER
IN TIRANA

FATOS NANO, hailed as Albania's peacemaker, backed down yesterday from his demands that President Berisha resign immediately.

Mr Nano, a former Socialist Prime Minister who was jailed for four years by Mr Berisha on trumped-up charges, said that free and fair elections were the ideal way to depose the President.

Colleagues praised the move, saying Mr Nano was attempting to avert a civil war. They fear that Berisha loyalists are being recruited and armed by the Interior Ministry, and that any push for the President's resignation could provoke a

violent overthrow of the fledgling Government of national unity.

Mr Nano, in his first public appearance after being freed from jail last week, showed no animosity towards a President who had delighted in humiliating him; Mr Berisha insisted that his head be shaved before being sent to jail. Mr Nano said: "I am inclined to shake hands with him as an Albanian citizen rather than as a President."

Outside the Socialist Party headquarters, Mr Nano was given a rapturous reception by hundreds of Albanians who pressed against the iron railings of the building. "He serves the whole nation," Luca Ruci, a former army officer, said. "He knows it's a disaster to distinguish

between North and South. We're a small nation."

The present lull in the mayhem afflicting the country is deceptive. There is disturbing evidence that arms being distributed as part of a "law and order" campaign are falling into the hands of pro-Berisha militants. A complete rift has also occurred between the Defence and Interior ministries. Broadly, the Defence Ministry and the army are represented in Government by the opposition Socialists, while Mr Berisha's Democratic Party keeps a firm rein on the Interior Ministry and the Shik secret police.

In the turmoil of the past two weeks, the army lost most of its guns. In the South they remain in

rebel hands, but in the North they are now being handed to new police recruits. Western diplomats fear that something unpleasant is afoot. "I've seen some of these guys who are getting guns and they don't look the most savoury types," said one.

Mr Nano said he was prepared to travel anywhere in Albania in a bid to persuade the people to give up their weapons. His personal crusade would begin in his birthplace and rebel stronghold of Gjirokaster.

Representatives of the new Government have begun visiting most rebel towns. Yesterday Bashkim Fino, the Prime Minister, was due to meet rebels in the oil town of Ballsh; talks with representatives from Vlore were held over the weekend.

Mr Nano said the new Government was "the first healthy fruit or flower" to emerge from Albania's political wilderness. Despite the hopes of a majority of the population that Europe would intervene militarily to end the anarchy, he believed that domestic political dialogue could resolve the crisis. "My party and other political parties should act in an aggressive way as peacemaking missions. We don't need any [UN] blue helmets and others," he said as a high-level European assessment team flew into Tirana yesterday for talks on how to help the new broad-based Government end the anarchy. The 11-strong team will first talk to ambassadors of the European

Union and America before meeting the national unity Government.

Paskal Milo, one of the opposition prime ministerial candidates whom Mr Berisha rejected last week, said Mr Nano was the ideal man to guide Albania back from the brink of self-destruction. "He's cultivated, a genuine reformist and a good economist. However, he feared that offering Mr Berisha the chance to be toppled in an election could backfire because of Shik's infiltration of the Interior Ministry. This, he said, was the President's last attempt to divide Albania permanently. "Berisha is a very dangerous man. If he does not resign he will try to use and organise parallel structures to manipulate elections," he claimed.

SANTIAGO LYON/AP

Mafia thugs in Albania hold exodus to ransom

FROM ANTHONY LOYD IN DURRES

EVERYTHING has its price. The price of freedom for those wishing to flee Albania's shores across the Adriatic to Italy is \$800 (£500), or 20 times the average Albanian's annual salary.

The two-week-old insurrection may have wrecked the economy and ruined the lives of most civilians, but the armed mafia gangs plying the trade in human cargo are growing fat on the suffering.

"If I put my life savings together I may have the chance of a place on a boat," said a distraught young woman among the throng on the quayside at Durres. "We are in total despair here. All our hopes for the development of democracy over the last five years have been smashed. I've just got to get out."

Yet those who can afford the journey face uncertainty from the moment they hand over their money to one of the local gangs in the decrepit docks at Durres. They may have to wait days for a boat, sleeping rough in the port's derelict buildings, only to be crammed upon a vessel barely seaworthy for a 40-mile night voyage to the Italian coast at Brindisi. Even when they arrive they are met by Italian police and taken off to a refugee camp, from where they will almost certainly be repatriated at the earliest opportunity.

They were loading up a rusting tug when I arrived at the waterfront. Several hundred Albanians, most of them young men, were packed together on the deck and bridge. Some scrambled to find a position hanging from the rails. The boat looked as if it was about to capsize even before it left the quay.

A handful of police hung around nervously at the dock's gates, fingering their Kalashnikovs, but would go no further inside. "I wouldn't go in there," one said. "It's a no-go zone for us and anything could happen."

About 2,000 people jostled along the waterfront in the empty industrial section of the port. Their mood was ugly and they quickly turned on strangers, seeing them as a potential source of cash. Many of them are armed, kept at bay from rushing the boats only by the better armed gangs.

One group debated about taking a journalist's interpreter hostage while others closed in with an eye to taking wallets or cameras. The scene is being repeated in ports the length of Albania's coastline.

"I've been sleeping here for seven days waiting for a boat out," one man said. "I am the only carner in my family. They left them here as I can make more money as a refugee in Italy and send it back. But at



An Albanian gunman fires over the heads of people trying to flee from the port of Durres yesterday. Most of those who succeed in reaching Italy will be repatriated

the moment I don't even feel safe among my own people."

There is no longer any chance of a surreptitious landing in a deserted Italian cove. The Italian coast swarms with naval craft and patrols to catch those who try to land anywhere else than at Bari or Brindisi, and those disembarking there do so straight into the arms of Italian security forces.

Albanian fishermen have a stark choice, either to capitulate on the exodus or be

hijacked by others who wish to do so. There have been innumerable incidents of reluctant skippers being told at gunpoint to "lend" their boat to the gangsters.

Ilirjan looks like a pirate but insists he is innocent of trafficking refugees, even though there is a crowd waiting outside his house asking for passage on his fishing boat. He is blind in one eye, which gives off an opaque glow, and has lost three fingers on his left hand.

"I sent my family to Italy three days ago to be safe and have some chance in life," he mutters, scratching his torn shirt-sleeves. "They did not have anywhere to stay when they arrived in Italy, but neither did any of the others. They have probably been sent north to a refugee camp — I'm not sure."

But he is sure that his family had arrived safely, which is more than most of his relatives drift away into the darkness at Durres. As we

talk, a friend of Ilirjan runs in to tell him that he has just seen the fisherman's wife on Italian television, blinking owlishly into the glare of camera lights as she stepped onto the quayside at Brindisi after a 20-hour sea journey.

But Ilirjan is very afraid. Although he sent his wife and two children together with his brothers and their wives out on a comrade's boat, his own tiny craft is in imminent danger of being taken from him by gangsters.

"There is a very well organised mafia operation here. I cannot speak to you about it in detail, but there are so many armed hands who operate in the port. I've been a fisherman all my life and know the good and bad in this town. Right now the bad have got the guns."

As he speaks, inexplicably a small boat out at sea fires a burst of machine-gun fire across the bows of another. Gangs selling did scores? Freelance refugee runners

being turned back? No one knows. Ilirjan rolls his eyes and spreads his hands in incomprehension. "All over the world you can predict things, but not in Albania," he says.

He does not wish me to leave through the front door, so he ushers me out of the back unseen.

"Take this," he adds, giving me a conch shell. "You can hear the Adriatic in it. It's not such a good sound at the moment."