

# Tirana pleads for aid as hunger takes rising toll

John Sweeney in Elbasan and Helena Smith in Brindisi

**H**UNGER is gaining a grip in Albania as food reserves are looted by armed gangs and attempts to flee abroad are rebuffed by local authorities in southern Italy, who say they can no longer absorb the wave of refugees.

The Albanian government yesterday appealed to a visiting European Union mission for urgent financial aid, saying it was facing a serious food crisis after government grain stocks were ransacked.

In the central city of Elbasan, the children's hospital is filling up with young victims of malnutrition. In one of five tiny cots, crammed into a small ward warmed by the morning sun, lay Artur Vrapit. Aged 18 months, he weighs 10lb — a quarter of the weight of a healthy child of his age. His big brown eyes are set in a tiny face, the blanched skin taut over his cheekbones.

To the sound of gunfire from nearby hills, Dr Ermira Karajpini said malnutrition was an increasing problem. "We already have 20 cases in the hospital, and the troubles will only make it worse."

Last Friday armed gangsters raided the hospital's central food store and stole three months' supply, including the milk powder and high-energy foods needed for the malnourished. The hospital will run out in 10 days.

Dr Karajpini said: "Artur's parents are out of work. They have no money to buy food."

Elbasan's industry has collapsed. The town's vast, dead steel works, imported from China in the early 1970s, lies quiet. Nothing was being made, no money was being

earned in this backward region, even before the anti-government riots of the past week smashed Albania's economy and triggered a wave of looting and gun law.

"For three days it was a nightmare for us. It was war here," the doctor said.

"We moved all the children into the corridor, away from the windows. The children were very scared and so were we. All of the staff stayed here all of the time, so at least we can be proud of that. But these are terrible times."

About 9,000 Albanians have so far tried to escape the worsening situation by clambering on ferries and fishing boats to cross the narrow strait to the southern Italian town of Brindisi. Another 1,500 destitute Albanians arrived on Brindisi's shores yesterday morning.

"It's impossible to cope with such numbers," complained Bruno Mitrugno, the director of the Brindisi branch of Caritas, the Catholic aid organisation. "The state is not the least bit prepared. We have to start sending these people back and distributing aid over there."

With the mayors of Italy's southern Puglia region, Caritas has urged the government to stop the Albanians. "It's time the army and navy began turning them back in the middle of the sea," said Mr Mitrugno. "Unemployment is 15 per cent here and people have problems of their own."

Responding to the discontent, the Italian prime minister, Romano Prodi, has pledged that the refugees will be repatriated once order is restored in Albania. But many question the government's ability to round up the Albanians when the time comes.

## Novice ministers put faith in people

Joanna Robertson in Tirana

**T**HE minister of defence was drinking a glass of Coca-Cola surrounded by military trophies engraved with the name of his predecessor.

"There is no time for analysis right now," he said. "We must work to calm the situation."

Shaquin Vukaj is a member of the Socialist Party, and minister of defence in the interim Government of Reconciliation.

Mr Vukaj, an engineer, does not yet know if he still has an army. "I am not an expert," he said.

Albania's ministries are fragmenting under a dangerous rivalry. Ministers of the interim government are not specialists, and seem frightened by the responsibility.

The old guard has not truly stood down. Sali Berisha still holds the presidency, albeit behind locked gates and watched over by the presidential guard.

The chief of the Shik secret police, General Gazidede, has resigned, though no replacement has been announced and Shik continues its control by fear.

Yet Mr Vukaj believes the people will hand over their weapons. "We are relying on the human conscience. They shouldn't keep their arms... who are they going to fight?"

Although Mr Vukaj has

not met leaders in the south — some of whom are former army officers who have challenged Berisha — he says he has telephoned them. He believes that a compromise will be reached once people realise their mistakes.

Lush Perpali, an economist who was recently installed as secretary of state for the interior, works next to a Democratic Party interior minister. Under the interim government, the interior, defence and foreign ministries each have two leaders, who must co-sign every directive.

Mr Perpali believes that parallel ministries are being established.

"Phenomena like this can be seen and are very dangerous," he said. "There are certainly signs of arm-ing party members."

The interior ministry is responsible for overseeing the new general elections which will be vital to Albania's recovery. Mr Perpali is in favour of swift elections, but is not confident of the ministry's control.

Mr Perpali admitted he had little knowledge of Shik, which remains outside the structure of the government.

"Berisha knows this better than me," he said. "I do not know the exact figure of Shik, but it is a very large ratio of our population. I am an economist and know nothing of these things."