

A deadly rain falls on Tirana

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by John
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in Tirana

F I R E D into the air, a Kalashnikov bullet goes up a mile-and-a-half and then it comes down.

The sky above Tirana rained bullets last week. Most fell harmlessly, on the pot-holed streets of the capital. One dropped through the roof of an ambulance. Another came through the window of the office of Tirana's University Hospital.

A word came down in the rain of a 20-year-old man who lay in a coma on his bed in the military hospital. The surgeon, one arm of his gold-rimmed spectacles missing, looked at the prone form with

a bandaged head and said: 'A normal person has 15 life-chance points. This man has four.' No one knew his name.

A fourth bullet went through the breast, just above the nipple, of a 57-year-old woman who had just shooed her grandchildren inside. Nunje Jonuzi lay on her hospital bed with two green plastic tubes plugged into her nostrils.

When we asked where the bullet came out, a nurse pulled back the brown blanket covering her body and showed us the exit wound in her stomach as if it were a proud exhibit. The dark-haired old lady winced at this unwanted violation of her modesty.

A fifth bullet went through the collar-bone of Teki Shaholari, 54, while he was standing on the balcony of his flat. His wife stood by his bed, her eyes

red-ringed with tears. A sixth went through the back of 17-year-old Agur Bregasi as he was undoing his shoelaces before he went into his home. A doctor showed us the X-ray and one could clearly see the bullet lodged in his chest, about an inch from the heart. He lay on his back alternately joking and murmuring in pain. These are the vertical bullets.

The horizontal bullets also rained in Tirana last week. A white Citroën with four men inside pulled up to a roadblock not far from the American Embassy around six o'clock on Friday evening as light fell over the capital.

The roadblock was manned by plainclothes toughs from the new civil police who look remarkably like the old secret police, the Shik. They had the same strut.

In another car driving towards the road block was a Croat journalist working for Worldwide Television News. He described the scene yesterday: 'I saw the machine-guns of the men at the road block point down into the Citroën. I patted my driver on the shoulder, he put the foot on the brake and we slowly went down the hill and then parked the car in a side street. As I got out to get my camera we heard a long burst of gunfire.'

'One man got out of the car soaked in blood. The three others remained inside. I could see blood dripping from the Citroën on to the road. We got back into our car and left.' The men in the Citroën were taken to the military hospital. One was dead on arrival. One died on the operating table, a third lies critically ill.

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An army officer refused to fire on the people. He was killed

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The vertical and horizontal bullets claimed 30 lives and wounded 263 — or at least those are the confirmed dead and injured from the capital's two hospitals. No one knows the numbers of the secret dead, or the toll in the countryside outside Tirana.

Yesterday the bang-bang revolution came to a stop with a whimper. Or at least the shooting appeared to die down in the centre of Tirana. It was possible yesterday to walk from the presidential offices to the Skanderbeg Square — roughly from Nelson's Column to Big Ben — and only hear one burst of gunfire.

The cyclone of violence that had swept the country, prefiguring what could have been a terrible civil war between the highlanders of the north, loyal to President Sali Berisha, and the rebels of the south, has gone as suddenly as it appeared.

Many more people were out on the streets, the opposition politicians came out of hiding and President Berisha is, to borrow from Albania's Graham Greene, Ismail Kadare, the general of the dead army. Everybody knows that Berisha is finished, though probably not himself. The opposition politicians say that he slams doors, bangs his fist down on tables, beats his staff and storms around like a bear

with a sore head. 'Berisha's mental state is worse than that of the president of Ecuador,' said one, referring to the head of state who was forced to quit because he went cuckoo. 'We thought he was going to be our first democratic leader, but it turned out that he was our last dictator,' said another.

Berisha is President not of Albania but only of his own bad temper. When elections come in June — so long as they are not derailed — he will do even worse than John Major. He is still nominally President and he is still dangerous. The chaos of Albania, and rebel control of 140,000 weapons, looted from the state armouries, means that the country lies open to violent manipulation.

Berisha could come back, but the new Socialist party Prime Minister, Bashkim Fino, is rapidly moving into the power vacuum created by his unstated fall. It is as if there has been a secret withdrawal: 'don't mention the president'. Certainly, Tirana felt yesterday as though the people's anger — fuelled by the loss of US\$1 billion in Albania's crazy pyramid schemes — has been drawn.

The signs of Berisha's impotence are all around. The TV station and the secret police are the key organs of dictatorial rule. The head of the old



Albanians clamber over a fishing boat in a desperate bid to board a Greek frigate sent to evacuate diplomats. Photograph by Yannis Behrakis/Reuters

secret police, Bashkim Gazidede, a sinister former professor of mathematics and ascetic Muslim, has resigned and is rumoured to have left the country. The head of Albania TV news, Vjollca Vokshi, a Berisha loyalist who presided over a policy of numbing partisanship, has gone. 'On Thursday Albanian TV was the usual bullshit. On Friday it was as good as it will ever get,' said Blendi Gonxhja, a

spokesman for the anti-Berisha Democratic Alliance, who has just re-emerged from hiding. During the troubles, he was detained for 17 hours in a police station for no reason. He is still a worried man, concerned that there are too many Berisha loyalists in the new 'civil police'. 'We see too many bad faces,' he said.

And Berisha's Minister of Defence, General Safet Zhulali, has also fled to Italy,

though in his case he is rumoured to be running scared of the President's supporters. The general failed to deliver the army and attack the rebels. He led not quite a coup but what you might call a 'military suck', which drained power from Berisha without actually attacking him.

The army's heart was not in shooting its own people. There are even a few military heroes.

At the military hospital we were told about Colonel Pellumb, chief of the Tirana tank division. He was ordered by phone to bring his tanks out to attack the rebels. He refused unless the order came in writing. When it did, he resigned and was held under house arrest. Four days ago, said a doctor who knew the story, he was murdered, one of the secret dead of the bang-bang revolution. Who is to

blame for this senseless killing?

Berisha's vote shot up at the last election. From a 35 per cent polled to a fraudulent 85 per cent claimed. He fired up the pyramid schemes, trying to defy Newton's law that what comes up must go down. Thus far, the price of his arrogance has been paid by others, who were in the wrong place when the bullets fell to earth. Travels in Absurdia, Review page 3