

Germans salute Albania 'heroes'

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Ian Traynor in Bonn

GERMAN soldiers who fired on armed Albanians to protect Western evacuees fleeing the country were hailed as conquering heroes yesterday by German politicians and newspapers, celebrating the first shots fired in anger by German forces since 1945.

An Albanian was slightly injured by the shooting during a hastily improvised airlift from a Tirana airfield last Friday. American helicopters were continuing the airlift yesterday as the EU declined to send an intervention force to Albania.

Yesterday's *Bild am Sonntag* tabloid acclaimed "The German Heroes of Albania" above pictures of the commandos. The newspapers hailed the incident as a watershed in the long rehabilitation of the German military. The foreign minister, Klaus Kinkel, said German troops



The German Heroes of Albania, as seen in *Bild am Sonntag*

abroad would not stand idly aside when their own people were imperilled.

After consulting opposition parliamentary leaders last Thursday, Chancellor Helmut Kohl and Volker Ruehe, the defence minister, decided on Friday to dispatch five helicopters to Tirana to evacuate 120 civilians.

Television pictures showed

the German troops opening fire after Albanian gunmen shot at the helicopters. As civilians cowered and prayed, the soldiers escorted them on to the helicopters and evacuated them to neighbouring Montenegro. One Albanian was wounded in the crossfire, the German authorities said, while no Germans were hurt.

"It was exciting, of course,"

said Colonel Henning Glawatz, the commander of the 91 troops engaged in the rescue mission.

The robustness of the German response contrasted with that of Italian troops who retreated to their landing vessels, leaving 64 Britons stranded defenceless overnight on a beach at Durres, when Albanian gunmen opened fire on their rescue operation.

European Union foreign ministers meeting in Apeldoorn in the Netherlands yesterday backed away from calls for armed intervention. Initial EU action will be limited to a small "high level" advisory team, which will arrive for a three day mission to Albania today. The mission was described by Carl Bildt, the EU's envoy to Bosnia, as "pathetic", illustrating the hollowness of the EU's pretensions to a common foreign and security policy.

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'If we stay here we're dead'

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Joanna Robertson
in Durres

AMID chaotic scenes, United States marines swooped on to the beach at Durres to evacuate foreign nationals yesterday as thousands of Albanians thronged the port, trying to flee their country. Earlier police fired on the crowd, reportedly killing two.

In Tirana meanwhile, 3,000 Albanians chanting "peace, peace" gathered in the central square as part of government attempts to restore order. President Sali Berisha also formally pardoned the Socialist Party leader, Fatos Nano, who was released from jail last week. He was detained in 1993 on corruption charges.

The evacuation of Turkish nationals from Durres yesterday ran into trouble when Albanians seized landing craft, leaving the foreigners stranded. US marines were

alerted and two helicopters landed on the sand while others circled overhead. Marines, with orders to accept only those with US, Turkish or Italian passports, used rifle butts to beat off Albanians trying to board the aircraft.

More than 1,000 Albanians tried to storm their way into the heavily guarded docks earlier in the day. Police fired long bursts from automatic weapons and clubbed some of the crowd, forcing them back into the centre of town. This was the latest in a series of clashes between civilians and police in the past two days, in which four people are known to have died.

At least 4,200 Albanian refugees had arrived in the southern Italian ports of Brindisi and Bari by yesterday afternoon and local mayors warned that they were running out of space.

Ragtag bunches of weary people continued to walk into Durres all day from towns across the country. They

EU to send advisers but rejects military intervention

EUROPEAN Union foreign ministers yesterday ruled out military intervention in Albania, limiting themselves to an advisory mission, containing military, police and civilian representatives, which will leave for Tirana today. *Stephen Bates writes in Apeldoorn.*

In a bland statement, the EU Dutch presidency said

member states were "strongly committed" to helping restore civilian structures and law and order, but the Albanian government would have to accept responsibility for rebuilding the country.

"The European Commission is ready to provide immediate humanitarian assistance as soon as conditions are sufficiently

secure to assure its delivery," it said.

Germany, Britain and Sweden headed off calls from France, Denmark and Albania's two closest EU neighbours, Italy and Greece, for more decisive action. Denmark had been suggesting a force of up to 4,000 troops, while Italy is increasingly concerned at the arrival of refugees.

headed down to the docks in the hope of finding a boat to take them to Italy. Passage on a Mafia boat costs more than £600 — an impossible sum for people who cannot even buy bread. So they were waiting for any boat.

Groups were strewn along the beach, staring out across the empty Adriatic. Children played with seaweed and shells. Their mothers clutched carrier bags of

meagre supplies, and watched the horizon intently.

Valentina Koci was with her two small girls. "It's so dangerous to try to go to Italy, but if we stay here we're dead. It will be better to try and leave," she said.

Next to her, the newly-wedded Violeta sat with a plastic bag of belongings. She had three packets of sponge biscuits and a thin jumper. "I got married last Thursday," she

said, "but my husband has no money. Absolutely nothing. So I'm waiting for a boat."

Her husband, Vullnet, is an engineer, desperate for work. He said: "We'll wait as long as we can on the beach, because we have no other place to go."

More crowds were camped out along the rusting railway line running behind the dock fence. They had almost no belongings.

Bledi was squatting with

his friend, chewing on a meal of onions. He said that most people were only fleeing Albania for a few months, because they were frightened of the guns, the violence and the threat of civil war. Bledi was terrified of the new civilian volunteer police force, and said that men wearing hooded masks had fired on them as they tried to board a fishing boat, leaving four people dead.

The new force is taking most of its recruits from the north, and many are strongly pro-Berisha. Volunteers are paid £250 a month, more than six times the average salary.

They have already gone into action on the streets. Durres is patrolled by vans of plainclothes police, some masked, and all armed with Kalashnikovs. Further north, the road from Tirana to Shkoder is riddled with casual roadblocks, where police search cars and passengers roughly, and fire weapons into the air.

Cold and sick on a nightmare flight from a living hell

Helena Smith was among the terrified evacuees airlifted from Tirana and flown across the Adriatic by US helicopter to the port of Brindisi in Italy

WITHIN minutes of our huge United States CH53 cargo helicopter lifting off Albanian soil yesterday, nearly every one of its passengers were bowing their helmeted heads and vomiting. They were also weeping, a habit that has become quite common in Europe's new lawless land.

The other thing you discover when you're strapped into the bows of the helicopter, manned by marines, is that you become rapidly very cold.

But none of this was

really bothering any of the 53 men, women, children and toddlers who were being evacuated to Italy courtesy of the United States government.

There were American, French and Austrian missionaries, Italian aid workers and Yugoslav and Russian diplomats in the group, and they all agreed they had seen enough anarchy and enough pent-up rage and violence.

Some, such as Lejla Gjini, an Albanian lawyer who had won the green card lottery — and with it the hope of a new life in Washington DC — was certain she would not be returning to her homeland "for at least 20 years".

"Everything, just everything has gone wrong," she said, trying not to lose her composure. "And you know after 45 years of Stalinism we didn't have much."

Civil order has broken down in Albania. There is no rule of law and even if there was, as many have found to their horror, there is no one to impose it.

The shattered shells of burnt-out shops and public buildings are all that greet the eye when you visit towns such as Durres, on

the west coast, and Lushjane, Sarande and Vlore. They are testimony to a mob which only knows how to loot and destroy.

"One child, he must have been 12, was playing around with this gun when he just aimed it at me and shot over my head," said Jonathan Rosheger, an American evangelist who was fleeing the oil town of Fier. "Like all the adults around him he was having

from a 6th Fleet naval ship stationed off Albania. "It's not as if there's even an enemy they're fighting. It's just a whole lot of wild men firing into the air all the time."

In the chaos, the evacuation of foreigners has not been easy. The operation is one of the biggest of its kind undertaken in Europe, and the soldiers are the first to say they do not fare well in anarchy. The bul-

their fingers on the triggers of their automatic weapons. No one was taking any chances after the drama that had befallen a convoy of 80 British evacuees the day before.

Martin McCarthy, a retired police officer from Porthcawl in south Wales, said he and his fellow travellers thought they would not survive the ordeal. "On the road to Durres the convoy got broken up when gunmen threatened to smash the windows of our car. We were finally allowed through when our Albanian driver gave his wedding ring to a thug," said Mr McCarthy, who had arrived in Tirana 12 days earlier as a voluntary aid worker.

"When we got to the port we were forced to wait for 12 hours until an Italian warship took us."

Before we boarded the helicopter, a Russian diplomat whispered in my ear that he wanted to write a book about Albania that would tell the story of "what happens to people when they lose all sense of civilisation".

As we flew into the normality of the Italian port of Brindisi, I could see what he meant.

'One child, he must have been 12, was playing around with a gun when he aimed it at me and shot over my head'

fun but, boy, did I get scared."

President Sali Berisha is desperately trying to hold on to power as his country disintegrates. On Friday, a European Union ambassador told me the president had called him twice to say he had no intention of resigning.

"I don't think I've ever seen such madness," said Corporal Desmond Byrant, one of 181 US marines brought in to oversee the American rescue operation

lets showering Albania's skies soon scuppered land and sea operations by the British, Italians and Germans. On Friday night, the US nearly cancelled its air operation after a marine Cobra attack helicopter reported being fired at.

Ours was one of the first helicopters to fly into the US embassy compound outside the capital, Tirana, after the rescue plan was temporarily suspended.

Throughout the flight, grim-looking marines kept