

Flight of the lucky few

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Death and panic on Tirana streets

John Sweeney in Tirana
and Ian Black in London

HUNDREDS of frightened westerners were evacuated under fire from Albania yesterday as anarchy gripped the country. heavily armed gunmen roamed the streets of the capital Tirana, and a beleaguered President Sali Berisha clung desperately to power.

The United States suspended its rescue operations after a missile was aimed at a Marine Cobra escorting transport helicopters. Italian forces, who also came under small arms fire, rescued 500 people, including 65 exhausted Britons taken off the beach at the Adriatic port of Durres, by landing craft to a warship en route for Brindisi.

Two British ships, HMS Birmingham and HMS Exeter, were standing by and a small unit of British troops was deployed to advise ambassador Andrew Tesoriere, the Ministry of Defence said. German soldiers exchanged fire with local gunmen during their rescue mission.

Albanians took to the sea in a ramshackle flotilla of rusting gunboats and fishing vessels. The United Nations warned Italy and Greece of a possible flood of refugees as the slide to chaos continued and European governments floundered about how to respond to the continent's worst crisis since the Bosnian war.

Three people, including a girl, aged four, and a boy, aged 10, were killed and 72 injured by stray bullets in overnight incidents in Tirana.

Franz Vranitzky, mission head for the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe, called for an international police force to restore order, but governments made clear they had no appetite for military intervention.

"The Albanians have to sort out their own problems first and foremost and they are dismally failing to do so," said the Foreign Office minister, Sir Nicholas Bonsor. "It is quite clear that there is no military force, no police force, no law and order in the

country at the moment and it is unrealistic to expect the international community to go in and establish such a force."

Speaking after a meeting with Albanian government representatives aboard the Italian warship Aliseo, Mr Vranitzky, the former Austrian chancellor, said a police operation should be launched by a "coalition of those willing" to help.

British diplomats said humanitarian aid could be forthcoming but only if the situation stabilised. European Union foreign ministers, including Malcolm Rifkind, are to discuss the crisis in the Dutch town of Apeldoorn today.

Oblivious to the intricacies of international diplomacy, Tirana was a city in a ghastly frenzy yesterday, almost literally fizzing with fear. People's faces were lined with tension; every train of thought interrupted by yet another long burst of gunfire, sometimes into the air, sometimes not.

Around noon, rumours began to sweep the capital that President Sali Berisha had fled the country. These rumours were reported as such on the BBC but were later denied by the government-controlled media. Mr Berisha's wife and children fled to Italy on Thursday.

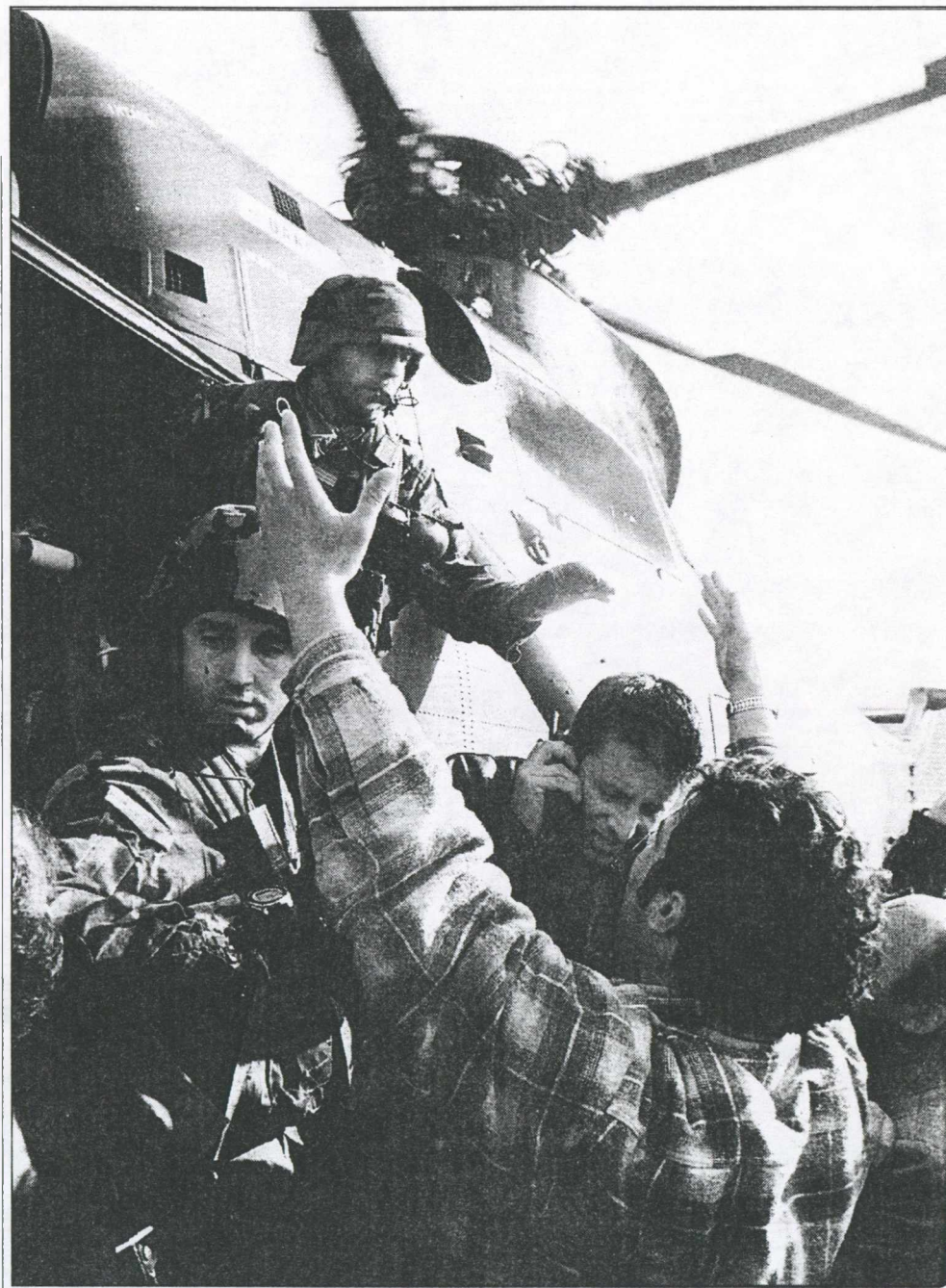
To ram home the point, an armed convoy circled Skanderbeg Square in the heart of Tirana around 3.30pm, an unconvincing display of force by Shik, the secret police loyal to Mr Berisha.

It was an ugly sight, a crocodile of vehicles led by two motorbikes, then two olive-green armed personnel carriers and a line of 13 police vans and Mercedes. Rifles and sub-machine guns bristled from the windows of each vehicle. Through the sunroof of one blue police van a sniper studied hurrying passers-by.

As the convoy passed the Albanian tourism ministry in the corner of the square, the Shik fired their Kalashnikovs into the air in a terrifying display of malice.

Rumours that Mr Berisha

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A desperate Albanian appeals to soldiers during an Italian helicopter airlift from Tirana

Lucky few escape from Tirana

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has lost his mind have become commonplace. "He is pathologically crazy," said a former minister in his government. "He plays a democrat by day but by night he is a gangster."

A Western diplomat, who saw the president on Thursday, was astonished that Mr Berisha was virtually on his own in the presidential palace overlooking Tirana. "There was no one around him. Virtually everyone had disappeared."

Law and order has disintegrated. All 1,300 prisoners from Albania's jails are at large and the rumour-machine says the Shik has armed some of the worst mur-

derers to fight the rebels.

The effective head of the Albanian prison service, Bedri Ceku, sat in despair in his white-walled office in the justice ministry, drawing on a cigarette. "The state has collapsed," he said.

Earlier, around 9am, the US Marine Chinooks and two Huey helicopter gunships flew in low over Tirana's Ottoman minaret. Outside the US embassy there was utter chaos. Families with children scurrying this way and that, coaches packed with white faces — American evacuees — wide-eyed with anxiety and US civilian police barking contradictory commands in dark blue flak jackets.

The buses moved slowly

through traffic jams to the embassy's residential compound just down the hill from Mr Berisha's presidential palace.

There the evacuees queued to board the clattering Chinooks while a troop of Marines circled the perimeter fence, studying the landscape through their sniper sights.

But they were the lucky ones. On the outside of the concrete and steel-barred walls that marked the perimeter, an Albanian man and his red-eyed daughter, aged two, looked on as the Chinook slowly took off. For some people it was easy to leave Albania, but for them, impossible.

Albanians cannot even

clear up their dead. On the main boulevard outside the president's office, a scattering of sand lay on a small puddle of human remains, the dark Macadam stained red. It would take two buckets of water to clean up the remains, but everyone in Tirana is too scared of being shot to go out and tidy up.

They are the remains of two men shot dead by the police at 2am. Officially, three people were killed on Thursday night, but no one believes the official figures.

The true death toll in Tirana is unknown. It will be more than three and much more in the coming days.

Additional reporting by Joanna Robertson, Tirana.

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anarchy

No excuse for inaction

ALBANIA'S PLUNGE into chaos has become Europe's second great tragedy since the end of the cold war. And, unlike Bosnia, it has not been unexpected. The risk is not just to life and safety for its people, but to its neighbours in the southern Balkans. This time there is no excuse for shoulder-shrugging on the grounds that this is merely "Balkan behaviour." We know that neglect now only stores up worse trouble for the future. Yet how the European powers should intervene effectively, having acquiesced so long and so complacently in the misrule of President Berisha, presents an even greater dilemma than the case of Bosnia. That crisis at least involved some degree of aggression across national frontiers: this is wholly internal. Yet that does not diminish the need to tackle the problem as inventively as possible — and as urgently.

Yesterday, Albania's already grim reality became overlaid by stock images of crisis: Chinooks with whirring blades, evacuees crouching low, unidentified hostile fire, euphoria when safety was reached ... this is the spurious stuff of Saigon, '75. While the evacuation of foreign nationals is important to those concerned, it is peripheral to the real issues and should not become a substitute for them. The other set of stock images concerns the nature of the "anarchy" spreading across Albania. The label is correct: the gun law (especially in the south) and the looting needs no exaggeration — it is as terrifying as it sounds. The spread of uncontrolled violence on Thursday to the capital of Tirana steps across a new boundary of lawlessness. But it may not be entirely random. There were mounting claims yesterday that at least some of the arming of civilians in Tirana had been organised by President Berisha and his loyalists. And his secret police appears to have staged some operations to destabilise and divide the opposition. Nor, even if anarchy does rule completely, should this become an alibi for turning European backs on the crisis. Yesterday, Western diplomats were said to be claiming that "this is Eastern Zaire, not Europe", and muttering about "the folly of getting involved in a chaotic Balkan country." It would be greater folly to stay uninvolved.

Mr Berisha has continued to be regarded with excessive indulgence until long past his personal point of no return. As late as Wednesday, the US State Department was romancing about "the positive political steps taken by President Berisha in the last few days". His new "coalition" government came far too late after days of stubborn negotiations while the south fell apart; his ruling party still insisted on controlling the Interior Ministry. The promise of parliamentary elections by June under Mr Berisha now appears complete fantasy. Yesterday, the EU said it was working with the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe to hammer out a co-ordinated and urgent response to the crisis. Europe does still have considerable economic leverage and must be ready to reward with maximum speed and emphasis a return to peaceful conduct. What is needed urgently is Mr Berisha's immediate resignation, a new acting administration, and the promise of immediate elections.

Albania teeters on the brink of chaos

Commentary

Martin Woollacott

ALBANIA is not so much a failed state as a state which has never had a chance to succeed. It is now reverting to a condition of dislocation and separation not seen since the last days of the Ottoman empire, with regions, towns and even villages isolated from each other, with arms in the hands of vendetta-prone highlanders and urban youth alike, and with institutions like the bureaucracy, judiciary, educational system, army, and police close to collapse.

It must be rescued, and the evidence points strongly toward the need for a major international effort, combining civil affairs teams and

technical assistance groups with police and some troops.

That is the last thing a Europe weary of its Bosnian responsibilities wants — but it is duty-bound to consider it as the most serious of possibilities. The reasons why are many and compelling. Albania has been a casualty of the Yugoslav wars of succession. Its needs have been neglected by Western governments so obsessed with former Yugoslavia that they pushed other considerations aside, as long as President Sali Berisha restrained, or appeared to restrain, the Albanians of Kosovo and Western Macedonia from violent moves that might have widened the conflict. Its hopes for investment have been disappointed by Western business that saw better pickings elsewhere in the East European world and which rated the country as a war zone, purely because of its proximity to Yugoslavia. Its vulnerabilities have been exploited by criminals, notably the Calabrian mafia, whose Adriatic operations a feeble Italy has done little to impede.

The almost complete failure

of development in Albania led indirectly to the crisis. President Berisha, unable to deliver on his promises of a better standard of living, turned to dubious instruments. The pyramid schemes, in part money-laundering operations for the only money that was being made in Albania — criminal money — did, artificially and temporarily, boost living standards and help his party get what votes it did in the 1996 elections. Afterwards, the combination of resentment of the ruling party's blatant cheating in the vote and popular rage over the failure of the pyramid schemes, which Berisha then started to rein in, undermined him.

Albania must be rescued, too, because of the tragedy waiting in the wings to replace the darkening farce of Albanian politics. There will, experts believe, quite soon be no economy at all if the political situation is not repaired. Legitimate trade is at a standstill, what industry remains is idle, agriculture disrupted, roads cut and bridges destroyed. Civil servants, doctors and schoolteachers are

not being paid. Looting has devastated already pathetically equipped clinics, schools, and government offices.

The destruction of the country's physical plant is matched by that of its political and social infrastructure. Albanian politics, before, during, and after communism, have depended on powerful figures with strong regional support, none of whom have ever succeeded in forging nation-wide coalitions. Political change has always brought purges of all the previous regime's supporters, sending northerners into prison and exile with one shift, southerners, many years later, with the next, each planting the seeds for a future bout of revenge. This was one reason why Berisha could not, or would not, widen the northern base of his regime to include more than token figures from elsewhere.

It is why he created a thugish secret police to cow parts of the country where he had no support. It is also why the rebellious southerners are so insistent on his resignation. This vendetta-like quality of national politics is a legacy that has to be repudiated. But how a government of national reconciliation, even without Berisha, is going to be strong enough to recreate the army and police, restore the administration, collect the weapons stolen in such huge quantities, encourage some economic activity and trade, and prepare for elections is hard to see, unless it gets massive help.

Finally, Albania must be rescued because of the dan-

gers its instability brings for the outside world. In Greece, the far right is pushing for the establishment of a zone of influence in southern Albania, which they call northern Epirus. While the Greek government naturally resists this, a sphere of influence has, or will, come about almost naturally, as communities near the border lose their links in Albania while preserving those with Greece. The same is true of coastal towns, like Vlore, which are already to some degree dependencies of Italy.

ITALY, the predator which, under Mussolini, destroyed Albanian independence, and the Western country which has most influenced Albania during and after the communist period, also has most responsibility for Albania's plight. It has a great deal to fear, as the preferred destination of the many thousands of refugees who will inevitably head out of a failed Albania.

Serbia, another predator in the past, fears the Kosovo Liberation Army, which Berisha allowed to train in Albania. The Serbians have already closed the border. Some dissident Kosovans see a plot to divide Albania between Serbia and Greece and resent the likely loss of their protector, Berisha. In a more general way, Albanians in both Kosovo and Western Macedonia must sense that the world's attention is, for the first time ever, on their people and its future. Their attempt to seize the opportunities this may seem to present could be dangerous, given Macedonia's fra-

gility and Slobodan Milosevic's need for distractions. Then there is an Islamic factor, with a number of Muslim countries involved in mosque building, the training of mullahs and in trying to extend their influence. In a stable state, this mixture of influences would be tolerable. In an unstable one, it could lead to grave troubles, inside and outside the country.

That there is going to be an intervention of sorts in Albania is already obvious. Franz Vranitzky, head of the mission to Albania sent by the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe OSCE, announced within hours of his arrival that order could only be re-established with outside help. There are two dangers as Europe, and America, react to this call. One is to allow any assistance to be captured by a particular political faction. President Berisha already sees that as his best chance of survival. The other is to make the assistance too minimal and piecemeal. The problems of Albania are so serious that they require a coherent effort over a lengthy period, with the weight of the main European powers behind it. Troops are far from the most vital element in such an effort, and there is no chance of their despatch in large numbers, but they should not be absolutely ruled out. The country needs civil affairs assistance in almost every area, from finances to bridge building, from constitution writing to disarming the secret police. We may not want to call it a mandate, but that is what it ought to be.