

West sends warships for foreign nationals but backs away from intervention as Albanian chaos spreads

Europe deaf to Berisha plea

John Palmer in Brussels, Joanna Robertson and Helena Smith in Tirana, and agencies

ALBANIA'S beleaguered president, Sali Berisha, made a desperate appeal for European military intervention to restore order in his anarchic country, but Western capitals showed little readiness to get involved and Nato warships arrived only to rescue foreign nationals.

Hundreds of convicts escaped as guards deserted their posts at the main prison in the capital, Tirana, and armed gangs roamed the streets shooting into the air and ransacking food warehouses.

Tirana's airport was seized by rebels, forcing frightened

foreigners to seek evacuation by sea.

The British embassy in Tirana organised a convoy to the Adriatic port of Durres carrying 120 foreign citizens: 65 Britons, 11 from the Commonwealth, three Irish nationals and 52 others. They were due to embark on two Italian warships yesterday evening.

Italian helicopters ferried 400 Italians and other foreign nationals to the battleships. United States forces in the Adriatic were poised to evacuate American citizens. US helicopters landed in Tirana to evacuate American expatriates in an operation the state department said could last for hours or even days.

The rioting, which followed the collapse of fraudulent pyramid saving schemes in January, has spread across most of the country. The police and



army have melted away as mobs have broken into their barracks and seized weapons. Mr Berisha's government seems to have lost its grip on Tirana and the north, which it held until yesterday.

The president summoned supporters and opposition politicians and persuaded them to sign a joint appeal for intervention from the Western European Union, the European members of Nato.

A WEU spokesman in Brussels said: "The Albanian parties are asking for us to mobilise and deploy a buffer force to separate the different factions." The WEU, the EU's fledgling defence arm, does not have a permanent standing military force designed to respond to security crises.

In Berlin, Klaus Kinkel, the German foreign minister, told a meeting of British and German officials: "The chaos in Albania can no longer be halted."

An EU official said last night: "If we go into Albania, who are we meant to shoot?"

The United Nations Security Council was considering

a request yesterday from Mr Berisha to consider the crisis.

In Tirana, Mr Berisha met the government and party political leaders. Skender Gjinushi, leader of the opposition Social Democrats, claimed the president had admitted he no longer had control of the army or police.

"The president is responsible, totally. He is the commander-in-chief and he has no soldiers and nobody to give orders to," Mr Gjinushi said.

He added that Mr Berisha had shown no willingness to comply with the rebels' demands for him to step down. Many investors blame him for failing to safeguard their savings in the collapsed pyramid schemes and even profiting from them.

Among the 600 prisoners who fled Tirana's central prison were two senior lead-

ers of the opposition Socialists, the former president, Ramiz Alia, and the former prime minister, Fatos Nano, according to a guard.

At least 12 people were killed and 50 injured as trouble spread across. Insurgents emptied armories in Shkoder, northern Albania's biggest town, in a night of mayhem in which four people were killed and at least 20 wounded, hospital officials said.

In the south, border guards abandoned a customs post on the Greek border at Kapshice, leaving it to the rebels.

Trouble was reported in Korca in the east and, for the first time, in Durres on the coast. Three people died in Elbasan, two each in Korca and Cerrik, and one in Puka.

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Britain bars Albanian rebel for having 'tatty' passport

Alex Duval Smith in Paris

AN Albanian dissident who urgently wants to travel to Britain to raise awareness about the situation in his country claims Foreign Office officials are putting up spurious bureaucratic hurdles to keep him out.

Edi Rama, a 33-year-old artist who a week ago applied for a visa at the British consulate in Paris, says he was turned down by an official who insisted his passport was "suspiciously tatty".

Mr Rama, one of the leaders of the 1991 Albanian student revolt and a critic of the present regime, has been invited to spend two weeks in London by the George Soros Foundation — a worldwide pro-democracy movement named after the Hungarian-born philanthropist.

Bill McAlister, a former director of the Institute of Contemporary Arts and a member of the Soros Foundation board, said: "Mr

Rama is one of few people who can provide an independent view of the situation in Albania.

"He was there less than a month ago and was forced to flee after being attacked by the secret police. We need him to come to London so he can speak to the media."

Mr McAlister does not believe the British Government is deliberately conspiring to silence Mr Rama. Rather, he says the painter and writer has become the victim of petty officialdom at a time when there is an urgent need for him to speak out.

Mr Rama, who has a two-year residence permit in France, said: "I come from the most backward country in the Balkans, where there is a paper shortage. Albanian officials stuck extra pages in my passport. Of course it looks tatty, but I am not suspicious."

Mr Rama, who has travelled all over the world and has been widely quoted in the international media since the latest crisis

began, said a British consular official in Paris also objected to the fact that his passport had expired.

Mr Rama said: "I am a dissident and am not officially able to apply for a new passport. The old one I have contains my French residence permit, which expires in November. It is recognised by immigration authorities all over Europe.

"The British consulate in Paris has called me in for an interview in three weeks' time but the situation is too desperate to wait that long."

A spokeswoman for the British embassy in Paris said consular officials needed further clarification from Mr Rama of his travel dates and what he intended to do while in Britain.

She said: "We have never refused him a visa. We are asking Mr Rama the standard questions we ask of everyone. When we have the answers we can issue the visa."

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With Albania on the brink of civil war, **Edi Rama** laments the loss of his country – and blames Western Europe for continuing to back the unscrupulous Sali Berisha

To find my country

WHEN I came into this world, I found two atheist parents and a Catholic grandmother, the daughter of a Venetian woman and an Albanian man from the Catholic community of Shkodra. This grandmother is the reason I learned to speak Italian and Albanian simultaneously, and the reason I was able to read Dante, Shakespeare, Dostoyevsky, Proust and Nietzsche during the long night of the Albanian dictatorship. These great thinkers and champions of free speech spoke to me secretly in Italian at the end of those nights when the Albanians, locked in the bunker of the paranoia of their bloodthirsty dictator, were trying to intercept the Italian TV channels with the most sophisticated of antennas.

Italian television was our only window to the free world. Our dreams of freedom took on the most magical shapes as we stared at the small screen where the Martians from beyond the sea used to appear. What the Albanians would not invent to contact the closest planet of the free world!

The trip to this other planet began to materialise in the

shape of a Biblical exodus in 1990. For the first time, we saw with our eyes that the earthly Martian reality did not look at all like the virtual reality our dream antennas had brought to us. We found ourselves locked in the Italian football stadiums of Brindisi and Bari. After beating us to near death with batons, they promised to bring us to wealthy Northern Italy. In fact, the proposed chartered flights that were supposed to bring us North brought us back East to the same prison we were born into, and where,

revealed itself fully in the manipulated parliamentary elections of May 26, 1996.

Some years ago, the leader of the socialist opposition, Fatos Nano, was arrested and thrown in jail after a farcical trial. Europe's silence helped to ensure this absurd verdict and the final damnation of the opposition as a group of former Communists responsible for the crimes of the former era, even though Berisha himself had been a distinguished member of Enver Hoxha's Communist party for 25 years. Consecrated by Europe as the

human rights, Europe lost no time in congratulating the strong man of Tirana.

For the European *realpolitik*, Berisha would guarantee stability in the Balkans. That he would not draw too much attention to human-rights abuses against Albanians in the former Yugoslavia and Macedonia was enough for them. Meanwhile, within Albania, the former dictatorship's shadow began to appear once again. Numerous appeals of the opposition and certain intellectuals were heard only in Washington, not

Above all it was built out of arms and drug trafficking in an arrangement between the government and a mafia willing to pay for liberty of movement within Albania. And the scandalous violation of the embargo against Serbia supplied that country with oil.

Meanwhile, Albania is one step away from civil war, and is being asphyxiated by Berisha's secret-police dictatorship. From the beautiful Italy of our dreams comes the news that in Albania there exists no threat to personal safety and thus no requests for political exile will be considered. Several days ago, an Italian official said: "Berisha is a modern leader."

Recently, Albania's one independent newspaper, Koha Jone, was burned down at night by secret police. All that remains of the building is a saying written on the burned wall: "European friends: help us to find a country".

Edi Rama, aged 32, is a leading Albanian painter and writer. He lost his professorship at Tirana's Academy of Art last year for writing articles critical of the president, and two months ago was badly beaten by unknown assailants in Tirana. He is now living in Paris.

He fired professors and attacked writers who dared to raise their voices against the decline of democracy

it seems, we are destined to die. We were back in Albania, but this time under the leadership of a former Stalinist become democrat.

"This is no longer a prison, but a free country that walks confidently towards democracy," said the representatives of Western *realpolitik*. They closed their eyes completely, first to the symptoms of the new authoritarian regime in Tirana, and later to the totalitarian phantom that

best leader in Albania, Berisha led the whole society into a vicious circle of fear and corruption. He arbitrarily privatised state property to enrich his supporters, and imprisoned journalists and militants in the opposition. He fired professors who didn't show their loyalty and attacked, with metal pipes, writers and artists who dared to raise their voices against the decline of democracy. Indifferent to the daily violation of

in Europe. The Italian and German ambassadors exercised pressure on OSCE/ODIHR observers not to invalidate the May 1996 elections and to bury their report in the drawers of *realpolitik*. Europe betrayed every principle on which its democracy was founded and continued to hold Berisha by the hand.

His supposed economic miracle was conjured out of pyramid schemes, and the people's passion for immediate wealth.