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Albanian Revolt Melts Into Chaos

Peaceful Protests Give Way To Thugs With Kalashnikovs

By Jane Perlez
New York Times Service

VLORE, Albania — There is no enemy, there is no war, but night and day this city reverberates with gunfire.

Rifles that were dumped on town streets to arm a popular rebellion are now being used in menacing shows of bravado at roadblocks on the main boulevard. The armed revolt here, which began 11 days ago as the outgrowth of peaceful protests, is showing signs of going sour and giving way to anarchy.

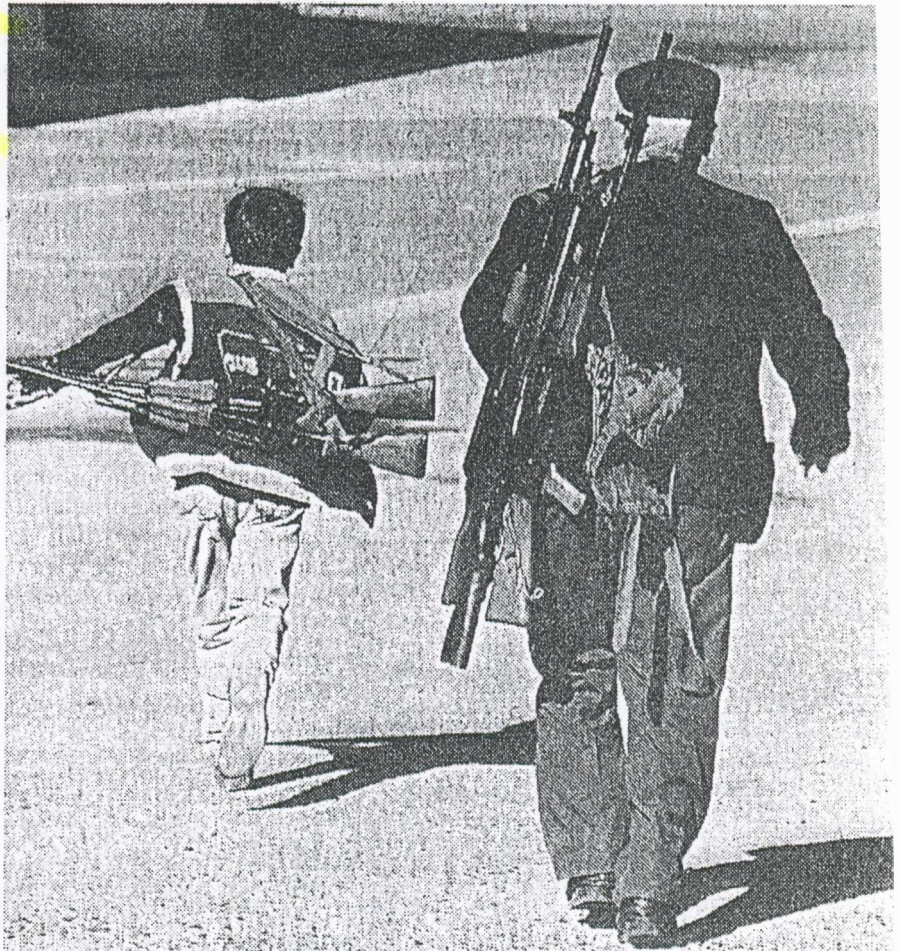
Everybody here agrees on one thing. They want to see the end of President Sali Berisha, whose government sat back — and, some Western economists believe, enriched itself — as pyramid investment schemes siphoned off depositors' money, leaving thousands of Albanians penniless. People here are even talking of having Mr. Berisha hanged.

Before the guns arrived, angry Albanians had been protesting for weeks, demanding that the government see that their investments be refunded. When the protests erupted into violent ones in Vlore, many here were proud that their uprising had set the stage for a string of rebel victories over government forces in 10 major towns across the southern region of Albania.

But ordinary people are terrified by the gangsters and thugs ruling the streets.

One young man said he was upset to see convicted felons, freed by the rebels from the jail of a nearby town, cavorting with automatic machine guns in the center of town.

It is too dangerous to venture out because the "crim-



Two residents of Elbasan in southern Albania walking away from an army base after about 100 protesters denouncing President Sali Berisha looted it of weapons Wednesday.

Michael Lecker/Reuters

See ALBANIA, Page 6

INTERNATIONAL

New Albanian Leader Calls for Talks With Rebels

Compiled by Our Staff From Dispatches

TIRANA, Albania — Prime Minister Bashkim Fino, facing a growing wave of unrest, said Wednesday that he wanted talks with armed rebels holding towns throughout southern Albania.

As rebellion moved closer to the capital, Mr. Fino met political parties to discuss forming an interim government to oversee elections.

His comments followed appeals from Italy and Greece to meet the rebels and an announcement that a European mediation mission led by Franz Vranitzky, the former Austrian chancellor, was to return to Tirana on Thursday.

"I think this is not a time to issue orders on either side," Mr. Fino, who was ap-

pointed Tuesday, told state television. "It is a time for talks and dialogue."

Because of the instability, the United States ordered 160 U.S. government employees and their dependents to leave Albania.

The State Department also said Wednesday that it had urged the estimated 2,000 Americans living in Albania to leave.

The department's spokesman, Nicholas Burns, said U.S. fears had grown because insurgents had not accepted a peace proposal put forward by President Sali Berisha and because large numbers of armed civilians had broken into depots and stolen weapons, creating a highly volatile situation.

With more than a third of the country in the hands of armed insurgents and the first signs of unrest in the north, there has been rising concern that violence will break out in the capital. On Tuesday, the Italian, French and British embassies said they would send personnel out of the country.

In some parts of the south the rebellion appeared to have deteriorated into lawlessness, with armed gangs roaming through towns, robbing motorists, terrorizing women and shooting at travelers from Greece.

A rebel council running the port of Sarande said anyone caught stealing or looting would be shot, but such warnings had little affect on gangs.

A spokesman for a newly formed rebel

National Committee for Public Salvation renewed demands for the resignation of President Berisha and said the insurgents wanted a place at the Tirana talks.

Anti-government rebels pillaged an arms depot near the town of Elbasan, a mere 55 kilometers (34 miles) from Tirana.

In the capital itself, witnesses reported that groups of men had entered the military academy and removed small arms.

Tirana's mayor and leaders of major political parties appeared on television to urge residents to remain calm.

Albania's exiled King Leka said he was assessing the situation hour by hour and was prepared to return if he judged the right moment had come. "I could be in Tirana within 24 hours," he said. (Reuters, AP)



Arben Celis/Re

Prime Minister Fino.

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Albania's Crisis

Albania is collapsing into anarchy, and neither President Sali Berisha nor the opposition parties seem able to halt the deadly slide.

Europe's major powers must make a strong diplomatic effort to push the crisis back into peaceful political channels.

The largely leaderless rebellion that broke out several weeks ago in southern Albania has now spread north to the outskirts of Tirana, the capital. Assault weapons are being handed out from looted armories, prisoners are walking out of unguarded jails and Tirana's airport is no longer under government control. Scores of Albanians have already been killed in the fighting. Foreign countries, including the United States, have begun evacuating their citizens.

Thursday, Albania's desperate political leaders pleaded for emergency help from the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, the European Union and the United Nations.

Meanwhile, former Chancellor Franz Vranitzky of Austria is conducting an urgent political mediation mission for the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the group whose recommendations helped resolve the recent political showdown in Serbia.

Albania's crisis is far more acute than Serbia's. For Mr. Vranitzky's mission to succeed, it must be seen to be strongly backed by countries like Italy, Greece, Germany and France, as

well as the United States, which is also an OSCE member. Diplomacy may eventually have to be supplemented by some form of European peacekeeping force, to supervise the disarming of civilians and re-establish civil authority. But no outside military force should be deployed until all major Albanian groups — not just the narrowly based political parties — agree on a political plan for restoring order and moving toward a new democratic legitimacy.

For years European countries have talked about, and taken stumbling steps to create, new institutions capable of containing dangerous regional crises. These efforts failed the test of Bosnia's disintegration in the early 1990s. This time European leaders promise to perform more effectively. It is important that they do so. While calm now prevails among the large Albanian populations in the neighboring Kosovo region of Serbia and in Macedonia, prolonged anarchy in Albania could trigger regional violence.

The United States, as a guarantor of the Dayton peace agreements, has a direct interest in preserving the fragile Balkan peace. It also has a longer-term interest in seeing Europe learn how to manage regional crises on its own. Washington should do all it can to encourage an effective European response to Albania's crisis.

— THE NEW YORK TIMES.