

Albanian unrest spreads to north

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Helena Smith in Tirana

ALBANIA'S president, Sali Berisha, appointed a little-known Socialist as the country's new prime minister yesterday but the concession, intended to stem the spread of rebellion, went largely unnoticed in a country slipping ever deeper into chaos.

For the first time there were reports of towns in the previously quiescent north falling into the hands of armed civilians, in a general breakdown of law and order following the collapse of a string of get-rich-quick investment schemes.

Reports reaching Tirana said that in Tropoje, President Berisha's northern home town, insurgents had ransacked a barracks and seized weapons. However, they could have been government supporters determined not to let the barracks fall into the hands of the rebels. Barracks in the northern towns of Bajram Curri and Kukes were

also seized, again perhaps by government supporters.

About 70 per cent of the army is said to have either deserted or switched support to the rebels. Yesterday, rebels took over more towns in the south and seemed ready to gain control over the city of Alban, which commands Tirana's only open supply route to Greece and Macedonia.

Looters have been roaming the south, and yesterday an eight-storey hotel in the rebel-held coastal town of Sarande was ransacked and set ablaze, witnesses said.

In a clear sign of rising Western concern, the Foreign Office yesterday urged British citizens to leave Albania. France, Germany and Italy have given their citizens similar advice. A Western diplomat said emergency action committees, which all embassies now have, had drawn up contingency plans to remove foreign nationals.

After stormy talks yesterday between President Berisha and his political oppo-

nents, the state-run television station announced that Bashkim Fino, a junior member of the opposition Socialist Party, would become prime minister.

Mr Fino's appointment is believed to have been a sop to the opposition, but wrangling over the composition of a government of national unity is far from over.

Last night, the two sides continued to squabble over who should get the interior portfolio — one that Mr Berisha's opponents say they must have if free and fair elections are to be held in June. The interior

ministry controls Albania's secret police and local administration.

Rebel defence committees controlling towns in the south were not impressed by President Berisha's concessions.

Foreign diplomats said criticism from within his own party over his handling of the crisis has been mounting.

The capital is becoming increasingly tense as fear grows that Vefa, the largest of the investment schemes, is about to collapse. Last night there were sporadic bursts of gunfire in the city.