



**NORTH-SOUTH STANDOFF:** Facing page, rebels on point duty outside heavily armed "independent" Vlorë; at left, President Berisha in Tirana, from which he sent convoys of troops south to confront the revolt



E U R O P E

# BALKAN WAR, AGAIN

Albania's south rises in rebellion against a state on the brink of chaos

By JAMES WALSH

SIX YEARS AGO, AS ITS LAST REMNANTS of communist authority were crumbling, Albania seemed to be the pesthouse of Europe, a country in the grip of a moral black plague. The world's sense of what it was like to be Albanian was captured by images of tens of thousands of refugees streaming into Greece and by boatloads across the Adriatic to Italy. Many of those tubs that crossed the Strait of Otranto left from Vlorë, a southern port with the honor of having been the site of Albania's declaration of independence from Turkey in 1912. Last week, with Albania again in turmoil, most citizens of Vlorë were not fleeing but embarking on a more dangerous course. Along with a few sister cities of the south, the people of Vlorë rose in armed rebellion, proclaiming their independence from the Albanian state and a government they believed had robbed them blind.

It was an explosion that had sizzled on a long fuse for more than a month. Several weeks of nationwide fury over the collapse

of a dozen high-profile pyramid schemes, which together swallowed the life savings of most of the population, found its breaking point in Albania's cleavage between north and south, with their somewhat different accents and folkways. President Sali Berisha, a northerner, had no friends last week in Vlorë, which also happens to be a capital of criminal rings that smuggle drugs, cigarettes and emigrants by speedboat to the heel of Italy, just 80 km away. Berisha's dispatch of troop convoys south following his declaration of a state of emergency only inflamed Vlorë's defiance. Said Mark Nyberg, 42, an American who runs a local orphanage for 65 children: "You have the criminals and the average people, but when it comes to the authorities this whole city is united—criminals, regular civilians, old people, young people, whatever."

Albania's crisis gave Western governments some bad moments, if not quite seizures of panic. The specter of full-dress civil war threatened not just stampedes of refugees but, in the direst scenario, a spreading conflagration engulfing Macedonia and Serbia, both with substantial Al-

banian minorities. By week's end, however, a 48-hour truce put the showdown on hold. Berisha consented to meet with leaders of the opposition bloc Forum for Democracy, and the two sides agreed, under pressure from Western Europe and the U.S., to offer the southern centers of revolt a face-saving way out. Berisha promised to suspend military operations and grant amnesty to arms-surrendering rebels who "had not committed crimes." He also offered to establish a multiparty commission to investigate the pyramid scams, in which something like \$1 billion to \$3 billion vanished—no one knows where, since the private funds were utterly unregulated.

The Democratic Party boss did not appear to be winning anyone over, though. He ruled out new elections, and whatever credibility he had retained suffered a crushing blow when he proceeded, in the midst of the crisis, to have himself acclaimed as President for another five years by his loyalists in parliament. Southerners upheld a nearly unanimous demand that he step down in favor of a neutral, technocratic regime. Ingenuously, they also in-

sisted that the government refund their lost savings in full. In Vlorë, Idris Nimet voiced the common suspicion that Berisha colluded with the money-making funds that promised astronomical payoffs. Nimet was among the estimated 20,000 Albanians who fled in 1991 to Italy, where he saved about \$10,000 in five years of work as a carpenter. He lost it all in the pyramid ripoffs. The President, he declared, "is a thief who stole our money." He boasted, "Berisha will never get to Vlorë. The people are with us, the soldiers are afraid, and everyone has guns."

He was not far off the mark. When Vlorë's uprising started the previous Friday night, the demoralized armed forces took to their heels, stood by or joined the insurgents. Left behind were arsenals of Kalashnikov assault rifles, heavy machine guns, rifle-propelled grenades, tanks and other armored vehicles. Rebels in Vlorë and in Saranda and Delvina, further to the south, looted thousands of weapons from these stockpiles. In Saranda, some demonstrators appeared on a television video disporting themselves in masks and firing into the air atop a captured minesweeper.

Berisha's ragtag convoys of regular soldiers and civilian conscripts seemed extremely loath to take on such firepower. They also did not appear ready to confront such strength of popular will, despite Berisha's description of the revolt as "a communist rebellion backed by foreign intelligence agencies." In one skirmish about 10 km east of Saranda, a unit of some 60 government troops simply drove away after a brief engagement with villagers, according to witnesses. Four of the villagers were

shot, but half the wounds last week seemed to be the result of sheer reckless gunplay. When TIME Correspondent Massimo Calabresi arrived in Vlorë following a road journey south past a series of increasingly menacing checkpoints, he found a city going about its regular business in a state of anarchy. Every few minutes, some motorist would stop, stick his AK-47 out the window and fire a burst skyward. The universal battle cry: "Down with Berisha!"

The President was not always so reviled. When he won election in 1992, his ventures in more open democracy and market economics gave Albania its first taste of liberty after decades of isolation under dictator Enver Hoxha's Procrustean communism. By 1994, however, Berisha and his Democratic Party were making it evident that they intended to keep power by whatever means. Parliamentary elections last May and June were denounced by Western observers as rife with fraud. Still, whatever squawks came his way from diplomats were fairly muted since Berisha's main opponents belonged to the Socialist Party, renamed communists who still draw most of their strength from Hoxha's birthplace in the south.

Critics of the President believe that Berisha, who had been steadily clamping down on press freedoms, showed his true colors as the state of siege was being declared. Early on Monday morning, a gang of about a dozen men in civilian clothes ar-

now he's reacting emotionally and not even trying to hide his real face." The President last week also conducted a purge of his cabinet, sacking Prime Minister Aleksander Meksi. Later, after the southern arsenals were looted, he fired the army chief of staff, General SHEME Kosova, who was rumored to be under house arrest.

The regime's heavy hand seems to be at fault for igniting the crisis. As Fatos Lubonja vouched, when the pyramid schemes collapsed the public response, after an initial outbreak of random violence, was fair-

ly quiet. Lubonja, one of the Forum for Democracy leaders and a dissident who spent 18 years in jail under Hoxha, noted that demonstrators "were organized for peaceful protest. They were ready to kill themselves but not others." One such demonstration was a hunger strike by university students in Vlorë, which Shik agents apparently undertook to stop, in the process allegedly stabbing one of the students. That was apparently the spark that brought out Vlorë citizens by the thousands.

How Vlorë could hope to turn its struggle was the big question. The truce offered by Berisha gave both sides a narrow opportunity for feeling out whatever conceivable avenues of reconciliation remained. But as the Balkans continued to shake and shatter, a new bloodbath in a mounting series of disaster cases was beginning to look no more impossible than any other.

—Reported by Massimo Calabresi/Vlorë

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