

# Insurgents set to take key Albanian town

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**A**RMED insurgents were poised to overrun the crucial frontline town of Fier yesterday, spreading the rebellion into central Albania. The army and regular police withdrew, leaving a hard core of President Sali Berisha's Shik secret police to hold the town.

Insurgents seized control of Permet, between Gjirokaster and Berat, late on Sunday night, and Berat yesterday. They were also reported to have captured one of the country's two air bases, at Kucove. The rebel successes means only two small towns separate them from Albania's main port, Durres, about 20 miles from Tirana.

Emboldened by their apparently endless supply of looted arms and ammunition, the protesters repeated yes-



terday that Mr Berisha's concessions were far from adequate and he should resign.

The beleaguered president and his rightwing Democratic Party were engaged in furious horse trading with the opposition over the composition of a new government. The once-

communist Socialist Party — Mr Berisha's greatest political foe — said it would be satisfied only if key security posts were taken out of the hands of the Democrats.

Without control over the interior ministry, which heads the police, and local authorities and the state-run media, opposition parties claim free and fair elections could not be held in June.

"If he doesn't make the appropriate decisions it will not be his political opponents he will soon be facing, but armed revolutionaries at the negotiating table," said Blendi Gonxhja, a leading member of the Democratic Alliance Party. "The rebels have the upper hand militarily; the state is no longer in control of the army."

Mr Gonxhja said he feared the worst because southern Albanians had always led the fight for change in the tiny country. "They fought for Al-

bania's independence from the Turks in 1912 and played the biggest role liberating the country from the fascists during the second world war. They are very fierce and I don't think they're going to give up easily."

The general secretary of the Democratic Alliance Party, Arben Imami, travelled to the town of Sarande via Corfu to lead political negotiations with local town leaders.

Western diplomats said disarming the rebels as well as paramilitary groups formed to defend the president, had now become urgent. There are growing fears that the bankrupt protesters, who have ransacked scores of arsenals, will soon try to sell the weapons abroad, including tanks, anti-aircraft guns, cannons and landmines.

There were toasts to Fier in the bars of Vlore late yesterday afternoon, as the imminent takeover of the town was

celebrated with beer and raki. But Vlore is running very short of food. Most people are living off tinned supplies and dried pasta. Prices are soaring for dynamited fish and sour-tasting bread, the only fresh supplies available. The town's water supply was cut by a fire at the pumping station, blamed on the secret police. The little water available was rumoured to have been poisoned.

The prospects of the crisis being solved without the president's resignation look increasingly dim. Talks between the Italian ambassador and rebels from Vlore, conducted on an Italian navy ship in the Adriatic yesterday, produced a declaration to restore order in the town and encourage civilians to lay down their weapons. Insiders said the Italian government had told Mr Berisha it would be willing to evacuate him and his family "if necessary".