

Schoolboys swap catapults for Kalashnikovs and rockets in Albania's home-grown armies

Berisha's offer of deal serves only to fuel rebel fury

FROM ANTHONY LOYD IN TEPELENE, SOUTHERN ALBANIA

PRESIDENT BERISHA'S attempts to quell the armed insurrection in southern Albania appeared in ruins yesterday as rebels decisively rejected his offer for political concessions and attempts to create an interim government.

Within hours of a televised announcement on Saturday afternoon, in which the President said he would set up an interim national unity government pending elections and grant amnesty to rebels in return for the handing in of captured weapons, two new towns in the South, Berat and Permet, had fallen to local uprisings.

Rebel commanders throughout the region said the concessions did not go far enough, and reiterated their demand for Mr Berisha's immediate resignation. "We have one resolution — the

resignation of the President," said Dashamir Kamberi, leader of the insurgents in Tepelene. "All of the captured arms are under our control and we shall not contemplate giving them back until Berisha and his henchmen go."

If anything, Mr Berisha's apparent climbdown only made matters worse. Rebels in Gjirokaster seemed to be enraged by his offer, and bullets from their indignant salvos rained down the cobbled streets in new abundance. Crowds burnt down the police stations in Permet and Berat, seizing even more weapons from an armoury in the latter town. Five people were killed in Permet in an attack by government soldiers.

Mr Berisha's problems in dealing with the rebels are manifold, and they are not

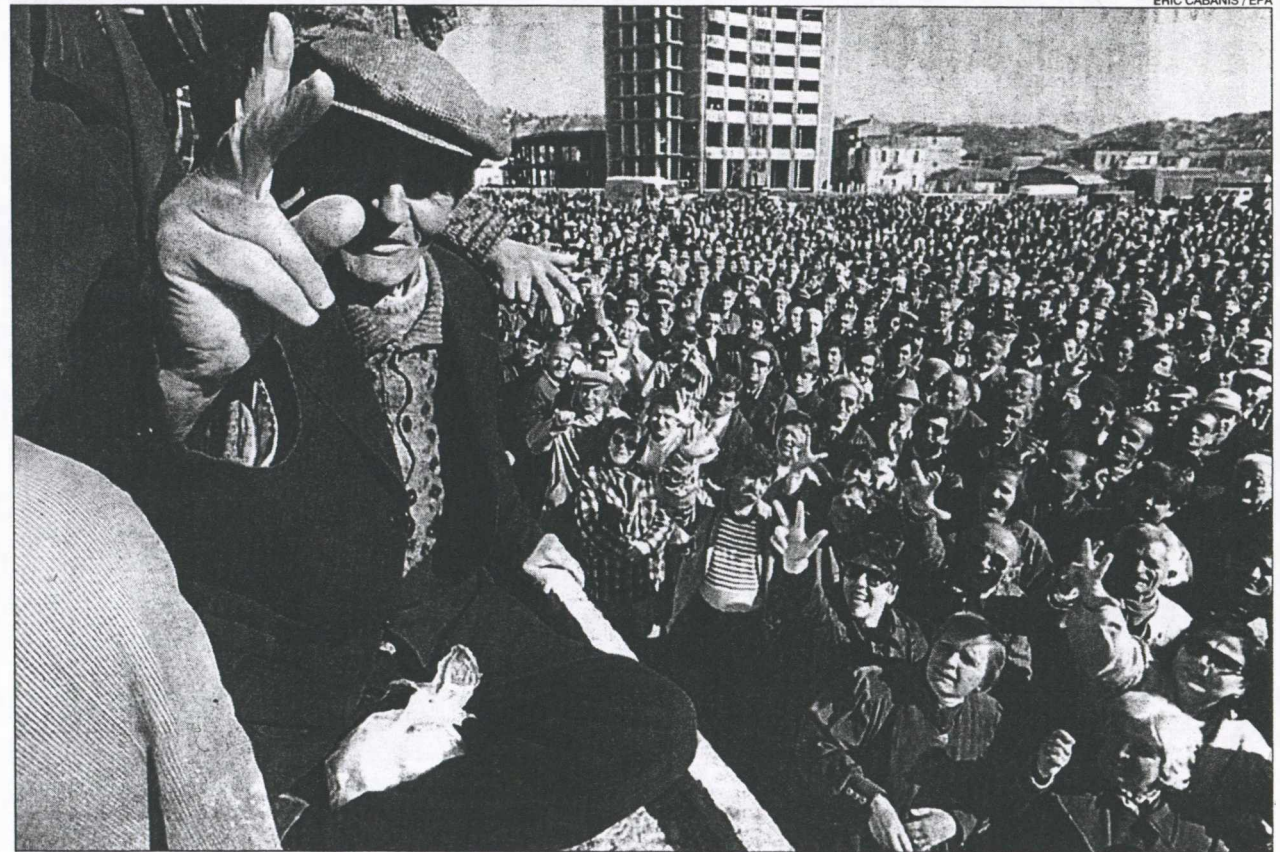
helped by the incompetence of his Government. In less than a week an impoverished, unarmed and tightly controlled people have become better equipped than the Bosnian Army ever was and has taken over a third of Albania almost without a fight.

The President's most recent failure to interest the rebels in compromise stems from the three-tiered nature of the Opposition he faces. He offered his concessions to opposition politicians in Tirana. These politicians are not representative of the rebels, whose allegiance is primarily geared to achieving the President's downfall, and Mr Berisha has not yet offered his resignation.

"The opposition parties can do whatever they wish, but the people's wishes are different," said Colonel Xhevat Kocin, the rebel frontman in Sarande.

"This is not a revolt connected to those opposition parties, it is a popular revolution for reasons different to their political agendas."

The rebels themselves are divided. Men like the retired Colonel Kocin are urbane figureheads who talk of restraint and tolerance, much as did Sarajevo's intellectuals at the start of the Bosnian war. How much influence they and their "committee" really have over the teenage gangs who possess the firepower of a



ERIC CABANIS / EPA

An anti-Berisha protester shows a three-fingered victory sign yesterday in the southern town of Vlore, which is in the forefront of unrest

small army remains to be seen. "Look at me, I'm the leader here and I don't even have a gun," said the grandfatherly Colonel Kocin, opening his coat to expose a pistol-less belt. Everyone else here has a weapon of some sort. Even ten-year-olds have traded in their catapults for Kalashnikovs, heavy machineguns and anti-tank rockets.

Each town has its own

agenda and own army. In Gjirokaster, more than 60 TSS tanks were captured from the Government on Saturday. Their officers and crews, local men, defected to the rebels.

"We're administering the armour over the command of the Gjirokaster committee," said Colonel Jusuf Gëpni proudly. "What we do with them is down to the people." The munitions in newly captured Berat alone could feed a

small war for a year. The mind boggles. For this is not a rebellion that has an easily discerned aim. Southern Albanians have risen up principally in anger over their financial losses in the pyramid saving schemes, found themselves the sudden possessors of weapons and are struggling to find a political agenda.

Every self-respecting Kalashnikov gunman the world over can name his

allegiance — PLO, IRA, HVO, BiH. Not the Albanian rebels, though. Yet they are armed and furious. It is a curious kind of peasant revolt in reverse — the arms have come before the agenda, as if proletarian Lloyd's investors took control of the army and then began to think about policy.

President Berisha has no other option but to resign. But even that would not solve Albania's problems. As each

day passes, the tiny nation grows closer to becoming a European Somalia.

"I don't know whether Berisha will resign or not," said one elderly man in Sarande, as he tried to arrange safe passage for himself and his family on a fishing boat to Corfu. "The last six days mean we shall be in armed turmoil for the next six years. I am not waiting here to see that."

