

# Armed Civilians Seize Most of Albanian South

## *Anti-Government Forces Dismiss Deal Reached by Berisha and Opposition*

Reuters

TIRANA, Albania — Anti-government forces seized control of most of southern Albania on Monday, dismissing a deal forged by President Sali Berisha and the opposition for a political end to the conflict.

With the Albanian Army in disarray, the latest areas to fall were the ancient town of Berat, abandoned without a fight by the military, and the nearby town of Kucove, where residents pillaged an air force base. One person was killed by a stray bullet from celebratory fire.

But rebels had to fight to capture Permet, a remote mountain region where political activity has been virtually unknown in the six years since the fall of communism. Five people were killed and six were wounded.

Anti-government fighters patrolling the streets said they supported Mr. Berisha's call for an all-party government, but refused to lay down their weapons until Mr. Berisha resigned.

They accused him of allowing fraudulent investment plans to flourish across the country before collapsing with the savings of hundreds of thousands of people.

"We don't trust him anymore," said a rebel in Berat. "He deserves to be hanged by his tongue."

In Rome, the Italian news agency ANSA reported that rebel leaders from the southern Albanian port of Vlore signed a declaration Monday with Italy undertaking to restore order in the town and encourage civilians to lay down their weapons.

It reported from an Italian military vessel in the Adriatic Sea, where Italy's ambassador to Albania, Paolo Foresti, was meeting rebel leaders.

The Italian Foreign Ministry could not immediately confirm the ANSA report, but RAI television carried a similar report from the ship. It said Mr. Foresti had met eight representatives from Vlore, a center of the uprising in the south.

In Tirana, Mr. Berisha met leaders of his Democratic Party and the opposition to form an interim government and set new general elections by June.

Perikli Teta, a leader of the opposition Democratic Alliance, said the two sides had agreed to split ministries equally.

More than 40 people have been killed in the last week. Before Mr. Berisha announced his deal with the opposition Sunday, Parliament had imposed a state of emergency and then re-elected Mr. Berisha to a second five-year term, enraging the opposition and dismaying foreign countries.

An anti-government spokesman in Berat, meanwhile, said soldiers left their barracks Sunday after state television showed parts of the meeting at which the deal was announced.

Shots reverberated throughout the town and the surrounding hills, and most residents appeared to be staying inside to avoid the risk of being hit by stray bullets.

The capture of Permet was considerably more bloody.

A witness, Hekuran Bejollari, said Monday: "A group of soldiers left yesterday, and as they were leaving they started shooting at people in the main square. There were many dead and injured. People took guns from the police station and two barracks and we shot back."

An army captain said 16 villages nearby had been captured by rebels. Journalists driving from the rebel-held town of Gjirokaster found no roadblocks on the way to Permet.

Roadblocks were also absent on the main highway south of the Shkumbin River that divides the Balkan country into north and south.

The only army tanks visible were clustered in a group just south of the river, apparently guarding the road north to Tirana and east to such government-held towns as Elbasan.

A police officer manning the last blockade on the road south in Lushnje, 20 kilometers (12 miles) south of the river, waved in derision when asked about the army: "What army? There is no army around here. We are the only ones left and we're thinking of pulling out. We have to protect ourselves."