

# Albanian townsfolk seize army base

GEORGE KARACHALIE / REUTERS

**Civilians are  
injured as  
leaderless  
crowd loots  
armoury**

FROM ANTHONY LOYD  
IN GJIROKASTER

THE largest military base in southern Albania fell into rebel hands at the weekend after an abortive commando-style raid by forces loyal to President Berisha precipitated an uprising in Gjirokaster and the defection of local troops.

The loss of the beautiful Ottoman town with its Byzantine fortress and extensive arsenal consolidates the rebels' grip on southern Albania and is the most serious blow to the fortunes of the Government and those attempting to prevent civil war.

"There shall be no concessions to Berisha now," said Colonel Xhevat Kochin, figurehead of the rebel forces in the region after the fall of the town. "There is no political solution for him left, and unless he has lost his reason he should resign immediately."

"Berisha has only two teeth left in his mouth but we shall continue to be vigilant, for even without teeth the wolf can bite."

While Colonel Kochin appeared to be in command of the region stretching from Sarande northwards, General Agim Gozhita claimed to be in control of Gjirokaster, ordering teenagers to hand in their weapons and vowing to punish looters.

Last night General Gozhita warned the population of an impending assault by government troops and called on everyone to lay in stocks of food and supplies. Although food is reasonably plentiful, there were long queues outside bread shops yesterday morning. There is some petrol available, but supplies are being taken over by groups of armed young men for military use.

In the abortive raid on Saturday, three helicopters flew south down the Drinos valley, landing at a military airfield at the edge of Gjirokaster. Up to 60 Special Forces troops disembarked, apparently with the aim of



One of the thousands of armed Albanians who took part in anti-government demonstrations in the southern port of Sarande at the weekend

hardening the army's hold on the town and using it as a base from which to attack the nearby rebel strongholds of Delvine and Sarande.

Their arrival at the town's police station provoked hordes of Albanians to pour into the streets around the building, while other groups surrounded the local barracks, location of the arsenal. The situation grew rapidly out of control as it became apparent that President Berisha's men did not have the support of their police, whom they then threatened with automatic weapons.

Gjirokaster was named after the Greek Princess Agyro who threw herself from the citadel's tower in the 15th century rather than surrender to a besieging Turkish army.

The local garrison commander was not prepared to make any similar gesture of honour on Saturday. His force had been depleted by desertion over the past three weeks from more than 1,000 men to about 200. A brief fusillade of

shots from his soldiers over the heads of the encircling mass of townsfolk, who grew ever more belligerent to a chorus of "Down with the dictator Berisha", exacerbated the situation. The commander ordered his men to hand over their weapons to the people and the crowd flooded in, breaching the arsenal doors and seizing the weapons be-

fore rushing back to the police station together with the defecting soldiers.

The Special Forces troops, abandoned by the helicopter pilots, fled to the hills. Whether by courageous intent or terrible miscalculation, a fourth government helicopter landed. Its pilot was shot in the leg and dragged away with the two other crew members

by the rebels. The apparently leaderless crowd looted the barracks for several hours. It was the ugly face of what had been a relatively bloodless spontaneous putsch. Ten-year-old children scrambled with adults and local mafia gangs to seize whatever weapons they could, firing them in displays of wild jubilation.

"Hey, mister, you want a

surprise?" one child said as he pulled a pin out of one of the thousands of grenades that were being scattered over the ground. Another boy, even younger, stuck a loaded pistol into a stranger's face, his eyes wide with new-found power. As car boots were loaded up with heavy machineguns, mortars and rockets, grenades, tossed like discarded fruit, exploded all over the base, and a teenager was killed by his brother as they grappled over an assault rifle.

As well as tanks, mortars and anti-aircraft guns the base had at least 25 field artillery pieces together with extensive ammunition stocks. All are now under the control of the rebels, whose gunboats patrol the coast, and whose militias dominate virtually the whole of southern Albania. The last unit of government troops, near the border crossing to Greece at Kakavi, had also abandoned their allegiance to President Berisha by yesterday morning.

whether anyone in Tirana represents the rebels' wishes. Emboldened by the fall of Gjirokaster on Saturday and with the prospect of taking the oil-rich triangle between Kucove, Ballsh and Fier in the coming days, they are unlikely to settle for anything less than the President's resignation.

Realising that he may well be playing his last card, the President was conciliatory in his address to the nation. "I think the Albanian parliament should declare a general amnesty for all those involved in the revolt, including civilians and army personnel," he said on state television, declaring "a day of national mourning and prayer for all those who died."

Blendi Gonxhja, spokesman for the Democratic Forum, said: "The agreement is very good. Whether it will be respected or not is different. We're very worried about whether this will be accepted in the South."

## Opposition agrees to an early poll

BY TOM WALKER

PRESIDENT Berisha yesterday won agreement from opposition parties on holding elections within two months and the formation of an all-party government.

But, despite raised hopes in the capital, the agreement is unlikely to satisfy the southern rebels whose remorseless advance continued at the weekend.

So divided has Albania become that it is unclear

## Rebels threaten Berisha's hold on oilfields



Albania's reluctant troops face a determined resistance in the mountains, writes Tom Walker in Ballsh

THEY call it the Albanian Texas. Ninety miles south of Tirana is Ballsh, a strategic railhead among a sea of nodding donkeys. The southern rebels have President Berisha's tanks and guns — soon, they might have his oil.

From here the road corkscrews southeast through a cocktail of pollution, poverty and sublime beauty. Oil — up to two million tonnes a year spews from the earth here — leaks from rusting pipes and blackened containers, choking lakes and streams. The villages are tangles of terra-cotta tiles, mules, satellite dishes and rusting cars, with snow-capped peaks shimmering in the distance.

And tanks. Around a corner submerged in early spring crocuses, four decrepit Soviet T54s growl and sputter, their guns pointing at the pass a thousand feet above. All the President's men are here — 60 reluctant soldiers, sleeping, heads resting on the sun-drenched rocks in the riverbed; dozens of blue-uniformed policemen, anxious and confused; and the faithful leather jackets of the Shik secret service, pistols and walkie-talkies at the ready. The northernmost frontline in Albania's surreal little war has been reached.

Ushered across the government-held bridge, we snake gingerly up the hairpins in our hired white Mercedes. Rifle shots crack out from the farms dotted all around, but at the rebel roadblock — a fallen tree — we are given a friendly welcome.

At the top of the pass is Fratar, the first rebel-held village on the route south to Tepelene and Gjirokaster.

Any number of spokesmen dash forward, anxious to give their account of why Fratar is going to war. "Berisha gave our money to

the police in the north so they could come to kill us," screams a gap-toothed adolescent excitedly. "He is a dog, a chien, capisco, eh?"

Tongue out, a youth scampers on all fours, panting, doing his best canine impression of the President.

A volley crashes from another hilltop near by, echoing over the olive groves. "Our leaders are academics from the mountains. There are 5,000 of us who will fight here," pronounces 14-year-old Gezim Voloj in faultless Italian. "When you write, do not say that we are rebels. We are the Albanian people."

Back at the bridge in the valley beneath, the atmosphere is nervous. Two of the tanks have disappeared into the surrounding mountains, but no one will say where. As we climb the bends back south towards Ballsh, a Fiat lorry packed with police overtakes precariously, but a hundred yards ahead skids to a juddering halt and reverses violently.

The back opens and two policemen hurl themselves downhill, running for the nearest houses. The air is alive with rifle and automatic fire, and the whimpers of half a dozen foreign journalists in a ditch. The ambush lasts for 20 minutes, ending with the police van speeding crazily back to the government bridge. Our cars limp on through the stunning colours of twilight to Ballsh, white towels fluttering from the windows.

Back towards Fratar the electricity lines have been cut. The army is still at the bridge, but now the firing is heavier. Somewhere in the hills, what sounds like a tank opens up.

"We have orders from the President that we should not attack for 48 hours," says the Shik officer. "Now please go."