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Fear rules in Albanian badlands

THEY STOOD on a great limestone bluff etched against the skyline like make-believe Apaches in a particularly lousy spaghetti Western. One Apache lifted his rifle high in the air and fired, the shot drilling into the silent mountain air of High Albania. Had there been a soundtrack, it would have whistled 'The Good, the Bad and the Ugly'.

We wanted to drive on, but as our creaking van moved off the Apaches fired again, the shots pock-pocking a warning. A shout, an answering yell and three rebels clambered and slid down a dusty ravine, sending rocks tumbling on to the road, every crash echoing and re-echoing in the stillness.

One half expected Clint Eastwood in a poncho, but what we got was much more dream-like. The star rebel sported zipped Albanian army winter fatigues, cowboy boots worked virtually flat at the heel and, wrapped round his face, a woman's red headscarf

streaked with gold, the sort of thing Mavis from *Coronation Street* would have worn on a posh night out. The killer touch was that through a gap in the folds of the scarf Half-Mavis, Half-Rambo was drawing on a cigarette. What movie was flickering inside his head?

Albania has been locked away from the world for so long that nothing works, not even the rebels' dress sense. He wanted to be a Zapatista or a Palestinian stone-thrower, but he just looked like a big girl's blouse. The Chinese-edition Kalashnikov in his paw was butch enough, though.

Half-Mavis lifted his rifle and squeezed the trigger, the spent cartridges spinning out on to the dust: welcome to the Bang-Bang Revolution. The foot soldiers of Albania's uprising are not unfriendly. They just like going 'bang-bang' in the air to say 'look at me', like Piglet in *Winnie the Pooh*. It would be endearing

were it not so bloody dangerous. The focus of their fury is President Sali Berisha. It's all his fault. The rebels' anger is a passionate, all-consuming hate, but it is never coherent and, at times, not far short of moronic. But the people have reason to be angry. They have been robbed, after all.

An old woman stepped nimbly down the ravine and handed over a plastic container of water to the Apaches. She led us back to her home in Bejar, just off the windy, hair-pin-bendy road to Greece.

Bejar is not a one-horse but a seven-donkey town. Her home was a cruelly poor but clean hovel of white stones. Goats bleated in a small enclosure; children squinted at the strangers; a dog snuggled in the spring sun; her son strode up, smiling.

From her front garden you could see the government front line far below, where three armoured personnel carriers squatted on the road like



squashed black beetles. They gave us teeth-rottingly sweet tea and told us their story.

The woman, a grandmother, had walked eight days — she patted her legs — to Greece to work. On and off she and other family members

had worked for five years in Greece and Italy, picking cotton and tobacco. They had scrimped and saved for five years and had built up a nest egg of \$5,000 (£3,125). They had put their money into the Gjallica pyramid, one of the many easy-money schemes that promised absurd rates of interest, then crashed.

Some estimate that more than half the country has lost money in Albania's version of the South Sea Bubble, a mass psychosis that has bankrupted the economy. Imagine half of Britain blowing their savings on the lottery.

The son, a father of three, smiled and escorted us on our way. As we looked down at the valley, he picked up his Kalashnikov and fired three shots into the air: 'That's for Sali Berisha.' He, along with all the other rebels in the south, are supposed to be handing in their weapons in return for an amnesty. Fat chance.

The APCs had retreated by

the time we were finished. We overtook one on the way back to government-controlled territory, creaking along at an elderly pace. The soldiers on top did not seem to be happy bunnies. Many of them have lost money in the pyramids, too. They do not look like an army that wants to kill its own people, but fear can make soldiers do terrible things.

The fear had been tangible in the government-controlled town of Fier on Friday. It's hard to describe tension in a silent crowd, what makes the difference between normal street scenes and a city on the dangerous edge of things. But, yes, you could almost *smell* the fear. Necks snapped round too quickly, eyes followed you, people's body language was jerky, aggressive.

Some were just doing their errands before the night curfew. Others were members of Berisha's shambolic secret police, the not-so-chic Shik, some toting guns, some just

staring. But they are not entirely confident. Some of them have lost all their dirty money in the pyramids. In this atmosphere, it is unusual to find someone who is willing to talk. But Andreas Mashani, 28, was happy to be quoted.

Over a coffee he explained that he and his brother and sister had worked in Greece for five years, saved \$30,000 and lost the lot on the pyramids. 'Berisha is dead for us. He is supported by only 10 per cent. Berisha is connected with the mafia, 100 per cent.' Who do you want in power? 'I don't know. I just want a leader with a free mind, not a dictator.' That's a problem. The rebels have no agenda, no recognisable national leader, no clear aim other than chopping off Berisha's head.

Berisha's problem is that he is the most hated man in Albania. For a strong dictator, that is no difficulty. 'Let them hate, so long as they fear,' said Accius. But what if they hate

more than fear? The bad news for those in Europe and on the right of the British Conservative Party who have placed their faith in Berisha, the leader of the (not so) Democratic Party, as the man best placed to deliver order, is that it looks as though his regime is running out of fear.

In Tirana, people are openly contemptuous of the President and the Shik. His secret police may have closed down Tirana's good newspapers, but not Tirana's gossips. They say that he is 'going crazy' and pulled down a bookcase in a rage. His anger seems impotent. The English-language paper in Tirana ran a story yesterday on how a Shik man killed himself with his gun: 'Probably he was sleeping with his throat leaned on the barrel.'

Nothing works in Albania these days, not even tyranny. *John Sweeney was commended as Reporter of the Year in last week's Press Gazette awards.*

Rebels capture last southern stronghold

President faces lounge lizard foe

by Helena Smith
Tirana

WITH THE end of an uneasy ceasefire, Albania last night resumed its descent into civil war, with battle lines hardening and the government's last southern stronghold of Gjirokaster falling to the rebels. Ragged bands were being organised into a fighting force and the regime began recruiting paramilitaries in the north.

President Sali Berisha's call for the rebels to surrender their weapons was widely ignored, as was an offer to hold early elections. Former army officers took control of insurgents in key southern towns and scores of soldiers switched sides.

Yesterday rebels in Gjirokaster put newly arrived government troops to flight and arrested their one-star general. Dozens of government

been fed by the conviction the ruling party countenanced the scam and profited from it.

In the shanty towns of the capital Tirana, populated by impoverished northern Albanians (the Ghegs,) officials of the ruling Democratic Party could be seen recruiting volunteers to 'protect' the president. Lured by promises of earning £300 a month, volunteers are also believed to be training in military camps, around the port of Durres.

'If the State and the Democratic Party need to be defended from the Red terrorists I would happily do it,' grunted Gjin Puka, a shopkeeper who came down from the highlands in 1992. 'Criminals are behind this mess, they are even giving children guns.'

The European Union is facing another crisis on its doorstep. Flying into Tirana on Friday for talks with the President, the Dutch Foreign Minister and EU representative,

far from the United States for the US to take an immediate interest, too close to Europe for us to ignore it'.

As his country disintegrates, President Berisha has thus far not given a press conference, though papers loyal to the regime have taken a firm line, one calling for 'violent repression' against the 'red rebellion'.

The West, which has invested much faith in the 52-year-old former heart surgeon, regarded his regime as a bulwark of security in the region. Diplomatic calculations overrode warnings about the pyramid schemes, in which Albanians are estimated to have invested sums worth almost as much as the gross domestic product.

Now that Albania is slipping into anarchy and civil war, President Berisha has begun to pose a threat both to the stability of his country and the volatile southern Balkans. If civil war breaks out, analysts believe it will almost certainly involve neighbouring states, with Greece and Turkey also being brought into the realm of conflict.

President Berisha has gradually turned Albania into a police state. Last week he appointed the head of the dreaded Shik secret police to take control of the defence and interior ministries in addition to the secret service.

Few Albanians have forgotten the concentration camps, paranoia and years of internal exile they were made to endure under Hoxha's despotic and deranged rule. Increasingly they say that those memories have come back to haunt them.

The lack of political dialogue and pathological distrust between Albania's parties has dampened hopes of the crisis being resolved politically. This raises the terrifying spectre of the President choosing to intervene militarily to quash the rebellion. President Berisha seems determined to take his country with him in his quest to hold on to power.

Additional reporting by John Sweeney

DWARFED by a Communist-era sculpture of Albanian fighters, a nattily dressed figure stood before a crowd of 3,000 defiant rebels yesterday morning.

This was Albert Shyti, the newly elected leader of the self-styled Committee for the Protection of Vlore, who has all the style of a lounge lizard.

'We have no reason to be afraid,' he declared. 'We are not going to lay down our arms until our demands are fulfilled. We have protected ourselves throughout history, and we are the only ones who can protect ourselves.'

Away from the crowds, Shyti was shifty and nervous. Flanked by members of the committee, he fielded more questions than he answered. 'We want Berisha to leave,' he said, reiterating their demands for a broad-based technical government, the return of money left from the pyramid schemes and new elections.

'If the army comes, we will respond to them. But just let them try,' he said. Shyti, 25, has just returned to Vlore, after spending five years working as a labourer in Greece. He said he came back to see what had happened to all his money, which was invested in the collapsed Gjallica pyramid scheme.

A military committee — made up of officers who have defected from the Albanian army — has been set up to guard the town's water and electricity supplies. Its leaders are retired senior officers from the army of Enver Hoxha.

Luftar Petroshati, 62, who served during the Communist years, believes President Berisha is planning an all-out attack on Vlore after the amnesty deadline this morning.

'He will attack with all the power he has,' he said. 'They are arming civilian supporters to come and fight against us.' Petroshati said the information came from four members of the Shik secret police, who had been arrested by the people of Vlore.

Berisha has begun to pose a threat both to his country and to the southern Balkans



Hans van Mierlo, said its members had 'quickly developed common ideas about the situation' and how best to solve it. But its lack of concrete ideas on ways to resolve the crisis suggest that the EU is bonded by little more than the common fear of a mass exodus of destitute Albanians.

Unlike Washington, which has openly criticised the Berisha government since it staged rigged elections last May, Brussels chose to close its eyes to human-rights abuses in the country. Italian Foreign Minister Lamberto Dini said yesterday that Albania showed the EU's lack of preparation for such crises. It was a 'classic European crisis of the post-Cold War era — too

troops, who had just arrived by helicopter to bolster morale in the city, ran off into the surrounding forests.

Vlore, epicentre of the revolt, is under rebel control and there was tension in Tepelene, with a stand-off between the rebels and the Shik secret police. A fault line has developed between north and south. Northerners, chief recipients of the president's largesse, remain his fiercest supporters, along with his own highland clansmen.

Enver Hoxha, the late tyrant (an ethnic Tosq born in Gjirokaster), favoured the south, the region hardest hit by the collapse of the pyramid schemes that triggered the revolt, and public anger has