

# Europe's peace pleas fall on deaf ears in Albania

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FROM TOM WALKER IN TIRANA

EUROPEAN shuttle diplomacy with Tirana began in earnest yesterday with little immediate effect, while the offer from President Berisha of Albania of a two-day amnesty for the laying down of arms cut little ice with southern rebels.

The President talked to the European Union's Dutch presidency and the lighter-weight Council of Europe, but both organisations achieved little result. A clearer message reverberated from the heavily armed South. "He wants our guns, we want his head," chanted Tepelene rebels for the benefit of the television cameras.

"The situation is frozen," Rene van der Linden, the Dutch MEP who headed the council delegation, said. "The President does not seem to realise the international pressure that can be brought on Albania." Hans van Mierlo, the Dutch Foreign Minister, who headed the EU delega-

tion, refused to comment on what the President said, referring only to "a moral obligation" for change.

Opposition politicians were not surprised at the European failure, but agreed there was little chance arms would be handed in until the President gave in to domestic and international pressure. Unlike the rebels, they have not demanded President Berisha's resignation, but they want an interim technical government, elections and a thoroughgoing investigation into the collapsed pyramid schemes.

The longer the President stalls, the more suspicious Al-

banians become of his motives. Rumours abound in Tirana that paramilitaries are being recruited; even that the President is recalling army units from the South, stripping them of their uniforms and sending them back as a secret civilian force.

"He expects us to sign papers asking for peace while he rearms and tricks us," Blendi Gonxha, a spokesman for the Democratic Alliance, said. Mr Gonxha tried to leave on a Swiss Air flight this week, but he was arrested by secret police at the airport and held for 17 hours. He said: "They watched me all the way. I felt

like Al Capone." He added: "I was advised to give up my passport."

Many in Tirana criticise the international press for referring to southern fighters as "rebels". They say that normally peaceful Albanians have had enough of a corrupt Government. But whatever the movement and whoever its leaders might be, yesterday it was still spreading.

It even looked possible that the Government's southern army base in Gjirokaster might fall. Contacted by telephone, a local teacher said women and children were on the streets with guns. As she spoke, shots could be heard in the background.

The nearby military base of Gerhot had been handed over to rebels, she said, and much of the population was armed. "You just say you're in danger and then you show your ID and they'll give you a gun," she said.

Photographs in the Italian press of the President's head of personal security with a Kalashnikov at his throat dramatically illustrated the evolving North-South divide in Albania. A fact-finding mission to the rebel-held town of Tepelene late on Thursday had gone disastrously wrong for Adem Hasu and a team of Berisha bodyguards when they were recognised at a checkpoint. The Ministry of the Interior said yesterday that their whereabouts are unknown.

## Refugees escape to Italy

**Rome:** Seventy Albanians, including babies, crossed to Italy yesterday in two boats but coastguards said reported sightings of two other refugee vessels turned out to be false alarms. The first

group crossed in a fishing boat from the Adriatic port of Vlore. A dinghy was found later and escorted to shore. Italy has vowed to repatriate all Albanians entering the country illegally.