

WORLD NEWS 5

Berisha rejects EU proposals to calm rebellion

Helena Smith in Tirana and Joanna Robertson in Vlore

PRESIDENT Sali Berisha defied European calls yesterday for political concessions to help end the armed insurrection in southern Albania.

In talks with the Dutch foreign minister Hans van Mierlo, representing the European Union, and a delegation from the Council of Europe, he ruled out fresh elections. Without this, the rebels say, they will not surrender their guns.

Mr Van Mierlo looked flustered after more than three hours of "in depth and very frank" discussions with the Albanian leader.

"I urged him to postpone and if possible refrain from military intervention," he said.

Insiders said that the talks with the mission from the Council of Europe — which promotes democracy and human rights — had been "especially explosive". Rene van de Linden, head of the council's delegation, emerged from the meeting particularly shaken, saying Mr Berisha had also rejected the option of participating in a coalition government with the main opposition Socialist Party.

This morning a mission from the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe led by the former Austrian chancellor Franz Vranitzky is to meet Mr Berisha.

But the Albanian leader's hardline stance now raises the spectre of the government launching a full-scale offensive against the insurgents — a prospect that many believe will lead to civil war.

The protesters looted arms from military depots as demonstrations sparked by the collapse of fraudulent investment schemes — in which Mr Berisha's ruling Democratic Party was involved — turned to violence this week.

Opposition parties say they would have little ability to persuade the rebels, who are not believed to have any political allegiances, to surrender their arms, especially in the light of rumours that the Democratic Party is arming and training paramilitary groups to crush the rebellion.

In the southern towns of Vlore and Sarande the insurgents refused to lay down their weapons yesterday, despite the president's offer of an amnesty.

The army's advance in the south has been suspended until early tomorrow.

Rebel committees in the two towns said they would not surrender their arms until Mr Berisha stepped down.

from the town of Fier was sealed by a roadblock of army officials and secret police. Along a back route, a twisting dirt track, a government tank sat stranded with about 20 soldiers, waiting to be escorted back towards the north. It had been forced to retreat from the area by the armed people of Vlore.

One of a number of armed shepherds in the hills said: "We are after only one thing. The end of Berisha and his mountaineers." He was referring to the president's soldiers and police, drawn from the north of the country.

"We are not rebels, we are just people. We won't give up our arms to Berisha. Maybe to someone else but never to Berisha."

In Vlore, a crowd of 2,000-3,000 gathered in the Square of the Flag to hear an address by their newly elected leader, Albert Shyti, aged 27.

"*Poshte Berisha*," (Down with Berisha) the crowd cried, their thumbs turned down.

Mr Shyti called out "Do not fire your guns, but save the



ammunition for the fight." The crowd cheered, and guns were fired into the air.

Mr Shyti worked in Greece for five years as a labourer, but returned home to Vlore in January. Yesterday he was elected by the joint opposition Forum for Democracy and the People's Committee for the Protection of Vlore as their leader.

Though acclaimed by the Forum, Mr Shyti remained something of a mystery to most local people, who said yesterday that they knew little about him.

"He is strong and courageous, he is boldly spoken," said Liza Hoxha, the Forum's secretary. "He has shown strength and responsibility throughout these troubled days."

The Forum said that a line of communication had been established between Vlore and the second self-declared "free zone", Sarande.