

President hosts round-table talks with Opposition to find solution for Albanian crisis

## Tirana grants truce to let rebels hand over looted arms

FROM TOM WALKER IN TIRANA

THE Albanian Government said yesterday that army operations in the South would be suspended from this morning, and declared a two-day amnesty to enable citizens and rebels to hand back weapons stolen from armouries in the past week.

Whether the measure would have a calming effect on the state of anarchy was unclear. The announcement came after five hours of talks between the Opposition and Sali Berisha, but the Albanian President gave little sign that he would offer any political concessions.

Mr Berisha did not sign the joint statement and its validity remained in doubt. Nevertheless, it did have the apparent support of Tritan Shehu, the Foreign Minister and Deputy Prime Minister.

The round-table meeting held at the Presidency, was the first real political dialogue since a state of emergency was declared on Sunday. But Albania remains a deeply divided country, with police and Shik secret agents holding the population of the North in fear, and rebels, sometimes supported by defecting army units, consolidating their control over swathes of the South.

President Berisha refused to comment on opposition demands that a temporary "technical" government be formed, which would give opposition parties ministerial posts.

"It's difficult to sum up what he said exactly," Skender Gjinushi, head of the Social Democratic Party, noted. "But in the end the only thing we were agreed upon was that the bloodshed must be stopped."

Paskal Milo, another Social Democrat, said "only seven minutes" of the meeting were devoted to formulating a political solution to the crisis. The talks are scheduled to be reconvened at the weekend on the agenda will be the critical issue of voting in a new Prime Minister to replace Aleksander Meksi, who was dismissed last Saturday.

American military commanders in Germany are preparing plans to evacuate more than 1,000 Americans living in Albania, a US European command spokesman said yesterday. (Our Foreign Staff writes). In Britain, the Foreign Office advised against visits to Albania for the time being and urged British citizens and their dependants now in Albania to leave if their presence was not essential.

In the lawless South yesterday, rebel groups in stolen tanks careered through the streets, and the death toll rose as a result of accidental shootings and tragic pranks. A tank stolen in Sarande lay in a ditch, a 13-year-old blew himself up and a 25-year-old man was shot while posing for international camera crews. At least 20 people have died in the past week. "It's Mad Max country down there," noted one diplomat.

State radio and independent witnesses reported that rebels had partly blown up a key road bridge between Sarande and Gjirokaster, cutting off



Berisha: refused to make concessions

the army's one significant southern base from the rebel-held belt extending from Sarande and Delvine northwards to Vlora.

An American diplomat said there was little prospect of the army regaining control of the region, given its lack of firepower and poor discipline. Its conscripts are paid \$2 (£1.24) a month and have little incentive to risk their lives.

The Government also announced on state radio that warrants had been issued for the arrest of Edmond Zhumari, the main naval commander, and five other military officers. One of the officers wanted is stationed in Vlora. The announcement seemed to be more bluster than any real threat to the disaffected Albanian military. The Government also said it wanted Italy to extradite the two pilots who defected in an elderly MiG on Wednesday; the two have sought political asylum.

In the capital, Tirana, the reopening of political dialogue did little to restore faith in the Government. The German Embassy was said to have advised its citizens, including aid workers, to leave the country, and Swiss Air reported a rush of bookings.

Diplomats here agree that the coming days will be crucial if the Balkan state is to be rescued from the brink of a civil war. They are worried that factionalism within the Socialist Party, the main opposition bloc, could play into President Berisha's hands.

Opposition leaders said they were pinning their hopes on Western intervention. "We need Europe and the United States to support us," Serran Ceka, head of the opposition Democratic Alliance, said.

He said the issue of a "technical government" could be raised by the Council of Europe at its meeting with President Berisha today. It is the first of several international delegations to be visiting Tirana in coming days.



David Smiley, left, photographed with Billy McLean in Albania during the Second World War, and at his west London home yesterday

## British war hero backs 'honest' Berisha

BY MICHAEL EVANS  
DEFENCE CORRESPONDENT

FEW people have a good word to say for Sali Berisha, the beleaguered Albanian President, but Colonel David Smiley, a friend of many years and a legendary figure in this troubled country, feels he must speak up for him.

"I feel very sad for him. I knew Albania when it was a feudal state, when there were no shops and no restaurants and the only cars belonged to Communist leaders. Now there are shops, restaurants and hotels, and there are too many cars on the road. Sali Berisha has achieved this."

Colonel Smiley, 81 next month, was one of the daring undercover British officers from the Special Operations Executive (SOE) who parachuted into Albania in 1943 to fight the Germans and Italians alongside the Communist partisans, and again in 1944, that time with the nationalists in the north when there was a civil war raging. He is one of the last survivors of Operation Consensus 1 and 2. Two of his SOE colleagues were Julian Amery, the late Tory peer, and Neil "Billy" McLean.

In 1949 he was seconded to MI6 for two years to train and arm Albanian agents as part of a secret operation to liberate the country from the Communists and the Soviet

orbit. It failed disastrously, the undercover mission being betrayed to the Russians by Kim Philby.

Colonel Smiley's picture — with those of Amery and McLean — was put up on a wall inside the Pyramid building in Tirana under the label "war criminal". Yet he, as a military adviser to the partisans from April to November 1943, had played a key role in sabotaging the Italian occupying forces and the German Alpine division.

Not that Enver Hoxha, the partisan leader later to become Albania's Communist dictator, ever thanked him. He used to claim that the Russians had saved Albania. "But that was rubbish, it was mainly SOE with some help from OSS [the US Office of Strategic Services, the precursor of the CIA]," Colonel Smiley said.

More than 50 of Colonel Smiley's wartime colleagues died on Albanian soil. It was President Berisha who helped him to find their graves, and a monument was set up.

Colonel Smiley, whose book *Albanian Assignment* was seen as such an important record of the war that it was translated into Albanian, said: "Berisha is an honest man and I believe he has done his best for his country. When he became President I was angry with him because I thought he should have been

all the Communists responsible for torturing and murdering. But he told me he wanted reconciliation, not revenge."

"I feel very sad about what is happening. He has brought so many changes for the good and I think it is unfair that he should be blamed solely for the collapse of the life-savings scheme. But he must try to form a government of national reconciliation."

Colonel Smiley has albums filled with fading photographs from his wartime exploits. His codename was

"Grin" and the Albanians he fought alongside were "Pixies". He became legendary for his expertise in blowing up bridges. He points proudly to a wartime photograph of a demolished bridge, and to the replacement bridge in an album from one of his visits to Albania since Mr Berisha became President.

For years Colonel Smiley was not allowed to talk about his MI6 assignment in 1949. He did not discover that Philby, then MI6 liaison officer in Washington, had be-

trayed the secret mission until many years later.

It was because of his attachment to MI6 and his SOE exploits that it was assumed it was his name that had been chosen by John le Carré for his character George Smiley, the hero of *Smiley's People*. However, Colonel Smiley said that the author had never heard of him, and "admitted that he had taken the name from the register of pupils at Eton. He was Master at Eton when my two sons were pupils."