

Yannia Hekrakis/Reuters

Rebels atop a captured army tank cheering outside Sarande in southern Albania on Wednesday.

Albania Lurches Into Conflict

Vlore Mans the Barricades

By Jane Perlez
New York Times Service

FIER, Albania — Palm-studded Vlore, a Wild West port on the Adriatic Sea where expensive new cars compete with donkey carts on dusty streets, has been organizing itself for one of Europe's most bizarre revolts.

In Fier, on a hill 11 kilometers (seven miles) north of Vlore, a ragtag group of rifle-bearing men haphazardly dressed in army uniforms manned a government front line. They were backed by more than a dozen tanks strung along the road behind them.

But inside Vlore, where secessionists were considering declaring an independent city-state, the people's army was cocky and confident. "We are waiting," said a local businessman reached by telephone. "If the army comes there will be a war."

The citizens in Vlore have their own tanks and armored personnel carriers captured from deserted army barracks, added the businessman, who insisted on anonymity because of fear of retribution from the government.

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Government Rejects Mediation

By Jane Perlez
New York Times Service

TIRANA, Albania — President Sali Berisha pushed the military Wednesday to regain control of two important coastal towns, and his government rebuffed a European diplomatic mission that offered to help mediate the stand-off between armed civilians and the army in the south.

Foreign Minister Tritan Shehu declared that the Adriatic port of Vlore was "totally out of control." Two men in their 30s were killed by gunfire Wednesday, and many others were wounded. "The government is going to re-establish calm with the fewest casualties and the least destruction," Mr. Shehu said.

Residents in Vlore, the coastal town at the heart of the rebellion, said they believed that army tanks and armored personnel carriers had moved closer to the town.

More than 20 people have been reported killed in southern Albania since Friday.

Vlore has defied a state of emergency imposed by the government Sunday and an accompanying shoot-on-sight

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REVOLT: A Wild West Port Mans the Barricades and Vows to Fight the Albanian Army

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Vlore has been the scene of anti-government rioting for a month, in which several people have been killed and protesters have burned police stations and other buildings.

With government armor stationed here and more on the way down the road from Durres, accompanied by trucks and buses carrying infantrymen, an armed confrontation between the people of Vlore and the government seemed increasingly possible.

Albania, Europe's poorest country, is now into the third day of a state of emergency imposed by the hard-line president, Sali Berisha, who has lost

control of the southern, and richest, part of his country.

The law and order measures have failed so far to take hold, making governments in Western Europe nervous about yet another wave of Albanian refugees, the third in less than 10 years.

Albania was where dramatic cracks in communist rule first began to show when tens of thousands of bedraggled refugees arrived on the Italian Adriatic coast in 1988, clinging to the hulls of ships to escape economic misery and political repression. After the Berlin Wall fell and the Albanian communists finally collapsed, a second flood of Albanian refugees landed in Italy.

The Italian government has stepped up

its patrols around Brindisi on the Adriatic Coast. It stopped ferry service from near Brindisi to Vlore on Monday.

It is unclear how effective a government assault on Vlore would be if it came. The men on the tanks in Fier appeared to be irregular soldiers brought from northern Albania, the home of Mr. Berisha. This was one of many signs, Albanians and Western diplomats said, of the difficulty the highly unpopular president is having in mobilizing his 30,000-strong army.

Western diplomats reported widespread defections from the military even as Mr. Berisha tried to regain control with the appointment of a new army chief of staff.

The revolt in Vlore and the unrest in other southern cities was set off by the collapse of fraudulent investment schemes that the government allowed to operate without regulation. Western governments have said they warned Mr. Berisha of an inevitable economic catastrophe as long as 18 months ago.

Almost every Albanian family put money into the schemes, which in fact were money-laundering and weapons-dealing businesses that were never capable of paying back the investors at the promised high rates of interest, Albanian and Western financial experts say.

When some of the schemes failed to pay back their investors and many Albanians lost their savings, widespread protest engulfed the major cities, including Tirana, the capital.

But the anger at the loss of money has taken on a new dynamic in Vlore, a seafaring town with a long tradition of smuggling and relative wealth. When the Albanians won independence from the Turks in 1912, the Albanian flag was first raised in Vlore.

And when the communists fell in Albania, Vlore quickly became the richest town in an impoverished country. Profits from the drug and weapons trade — as well as the smuggling of people to Italy — allowed the new entrepreneurs of Vlore to buy Mercedes Benzes, open restaurants and cafes and run banks.

It was this relatively prosperous way of life that the citizens of Vlore wanted to defend, the businessman said. In the last week, leaders of anti-government rallies in Vlore have demanded the resignation of Mr. Berisha and new elections.

In Fier, residents said the government's preparations to retake Vlore and to reinforce its positions here began Monday. A motorcade of army trucks rolled through the town then, loaded with armed civilians and nervous-looking young soldiers, one woman said.

"It was psychological terror," the 35-year-old mother said as she sat in her living room overlooking the street where the troops passed by. The woman said she had started to stockpile food; a large sack of flour rested against her front door.

But in Vlore people were confident that they had not only enough weapons, but also enough to eat. "We've opened up all the army warehouses that have food," the businessman said.

ALBANIA: Army Moves to Stifle Revolt

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order for anyone in the streets with unauthorized weapons.

The Italian foreign minister, Lamberto Dini, who spoke earlier Wednesday with Mr. Shehu, quoted him as saying that "the police and the armed forces have orders to isolate the places where rebels are concentrated, avoiding engaging in armed conflict."

The first military attack appears to have been a government jet fighter that dropped a bomb Wednesday near Sarande, a town opposite the island of Korfu, according to a Greek photographer for The Associated Press. The photographer, a former member of the Greek Army, said it was not clear if anyone was hurt. The government made no statement about the reported attack.

In the same area, the army appeared to have made an unsuccessful attempt to put down the revolt around Sarande. Witnesses said about 60 soldiers retreated after battling civilians near the town. A hospital reported treating four people wounded by gunshot.

The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe said Wednesday night that the Albanians had refused to accept a mission headed by Franz Vranitzky, a former chancellor of Austria. A spokeswoman for the organization said the delegation wanted to come to Tirana, the capital, to persuade the government to open talks with the opposition, respect

human rights and stop the use of force against civilians.

News agencies reported earlier:

Government troops backed by tanks and fighter planes went into action Wednesday to put down the uprising in the south, but they faced stiff resistance and in one skirmish appeared to retreat.

Troops retreated after a clash with armed residents near Styari, a village 10 kilometers (six miles) east of the port of Sarande. Four villagers and at least two soldiers were wounded, witnesses said.

"Eyewitnesses just told us that the battle is over and the troops withdrew," Dimitris Stefanos, a former prefect in the port, said by telephone. "The fighting lasted about 40 minutes, and at least two soldiers were wounded."

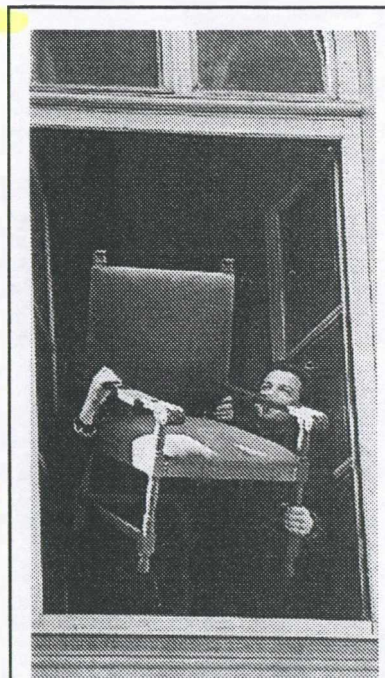
Rebels drove a tank captured from the army gleefully through the streets of Sarande, and hundreds of heavily armed men set up defenses in the hills at the entrance to the town, saying they were determined to fight to the finish.

A fighter flew over the village of Livina near Sarande and smoke rose from the area, witnesses said.

Meanwhile, a delegation from the Council of Europe arrived in Tirana on Wednesday even as the one from the European security organization was being told to stay away.

"The Albanians said they don't know whether this is the right time," a diplomatic source said.

"Our main concern now is to get the



Srdjan Ilic/The Associated Press

A MOVE TO UNSEAT — Belgrade University students taking over the office of the pro-government rector Wednesday.

government and the opposition talking and to make sure that the trouble does not spill over into other areas of the Balkans that are already unsettled," another Western envoy said (AFP, Reuters)