

Rebels seize weapons from barracks as secret police start house-to-house searches

Beleaguered Berisha puts close aide at army's head



The Albanian President needs to know that soldiers will fire at civilians if ordered, writes Richard Owen in Tirana

THE Albanian Army began yesterday to disarm rebels in southern Albania under emergency regulations issued by President Berisha authorising troops to open fire on protesters carrying weapons.

The protesters continued to roam southern Albania at will, and much of the country appeared out of Tirana's control, casting doubt on the army's ability or willingness to restore order. Opposition leaders said many protesters were prepared to fight despite the Government's "shoot to kill" policy, and there was a risk of "serious bloodshed".

Army bases in Vlore and Himara were looted. In Vlore, a four-year-old girl was killed by a stray bullet while playing in her garden. The hospital in Vlore was looted by rebels who stole food and clothing, firing weapons in the corridors and operating rooms.

In a surprise move intended to tighten his grip on the

army, President Berisha, who was re-elected by parliament on Monday after ordering a state of emergency, sacked General SHEME KOSOVA, his Chief of Staff, and replaced him with his own military adviser, General ADEM COPANI. An official communiqué said General Kosova was directly responsible for "failing to defend army barracks in the south against looters".

The move also appeared aimed at countering soldiers' reluctance to fire on civilians, even if armed. Two weeks ago General Kosova personally oversaw the recapture of a strategic bridge taken by the rebels in the southern town of Memaliaj, but it was subsequently recaptured. The army lost credibility as a result, with morale severely undermined.

The authorities said more than 1,500 weapons, looted from police and army arsenals last weekend in an orgy of rioting, had been handed in



A masked man fires an AK47 outside the university in Vlore. Mayhem reigned as rebels looted army stores, fired into a hospital and seized a warship

But in Sarande, on the Adriatic coast, protesters declared their own "government" and army commanders simply told their troops to go home, according to television reporters in the area.

The Sarande rebels commandeered a rusting warship from the naval base — part of the small and dilapidated Albanian Navy — and began firing at the coast. Further south, in Gjirokaster, a petrol station and hotel owned by Gjallica — one of the failed pyramid funds — was burnt

and looted. In Fier, close to Tirana, rebels in cars and lorries opened fire on an army barracks and seized army weapons until police arrived to rescue the local army commander. Army bases in Vlore and Himara were also looted.

The Berisha Government's attempt to impose a total news blackout was abandoned after international protests, with the European Broadcasting Union able to restore satellite links for foreign broadcasters, whose relay station was cut on Monday. A government

spokesman said foreign journalists were free to report provided they "stayed within Albanian law".

Journalists were expelled from southern towns on Monday and were yesterday advised not to return "for their own safety ... because the situation in some towns is still not under the control of state institutions".

But the Albanian media remained muzzled, and officials insisted this was in accordance with European and United Nations conventions. Pavle Mihalj, the Albanian Ambassador in London, said the internal media restrictions were a temporary measure, but insisted that international coverage was unrestricted. He said the situation in Sarande and Vlore and a "stretch of land along the coast" was out of control, but this was only "a fraction of the country".

There were reports of a crackdown in Lushnje, 60 miles south of Tirana, with troops surrounding the town and carrying out house-to-house searches with agents of the feared secret police, the Shik Troops in tanks and armoured personnel carriers also surrounded Vlore, the

Adriatic port at the centre of the rebellion.

Foreign residents, mainly Italians, evacuated from Vlore by helicopter on Monday said the town was still in the hands of armed rebels, many of them youths in their twenties wearing balaclavas or Palestinian-style keffiyahs and driving lorries and cars flying the Albanian flag, a black eagle on a red background. "There is absolute mayhem in Vlore," one Italian businessman said. "Complete chaos, a free for all".

Albanian opposition leaders said they did not believe Albanian troops, a third of whom are conscripts, would open fire on their fellow citizens. "They are just boys in uniform," a member of the opposition Forum for Democ-

racy said. He said Mr Berisha would have to rely on the Shik to break the revolt, which began as a protest over lost savings but has snowballed into a general uprising.

Albanians woke up to a second day of martial law after a night of eerie calm with police and troops enforcing a dusk-to-dawn curfew. The road to the south — which at Lushnje narrows to a single track over a bridge — remained closed by roadblocks manned by armed police and the secret police.

As dusk fell in Tirana, where a heavy security presence has stifled protests, Skanderbeg Square — normally the busy heart of Tirana — resembled a deserted stage set, dominated by the great mosque and an equestrian statue of Skanderbeg, Albania's national hero. There was the occasional rattle of unexplained gunfire from the suburbs nestling in the surrounding hills.

□ Rome: The pilot and co-pilot of an Albanian MIG jet landed in southern Italy and requested asylum. The Defence Ministry said they were being questioned. (AP)

General's mission to dragoon troops

By James Pettifer

THE Strategy by President Berisha of Albania's army chief and the appointment of General Adem Copani in his place indicates the difficulty the right-wing Government is having in making the state of emergency effective.

The army was rapidly scaled down in the aftermath of communism, as it was a highly politicised behemoth for a small country, but it has never been fully re-equipped and suffers from many logistical and leadership weaknesses. Command is still exercised by the sons of Second World War partisans, most of whom come from the south and have

little instinctive sympathy with Mr Berisha.

General Copani has been Mr Berisha's right-hand man on military matters for the past five years, and has close links with Nato. He comes from the south and is a humane, intelligent man who is unlikely to seek a bloodbath. It is probable that he has been appointed to use his personal authority to bring rebellious southern officers and troops to heel, and to try to get the army to operate as an effective force in the south.

Moreover, if the military is going to become the de facto Government, links with Nato may be vital: Mr Berisha has been seeking German military assistance

since last autumn. General Copani is a tough, impressive man with an independent mind who embodies the old Ottoman proverb, "To the Armenian the pen, to the Albanian the sword." His appointment may offer a glint of hope for a reasonably peaceful resolution.

Mr Berisha's hope must be that General Copani can bring unity to a force that otherwise shows every sign of dissolving into antagonistic factions under the pressure of events.

It must remain doubtful, however, whether the military will be capable of maintaining discipline in a prolonged occupation of the rebellious southern towns.



ALBANIA'S PRESS

Freedom of speech must be restored — and fast

One of the most important indications that Sali Berisha was leading Albania towards a more open and democratic society was his tolerance of a pluralist press. And one of the most depressing aspects of his response to the turmoil now engulfing the country was his immediate censorship of all news media, the blackout in the transmission of satellite television pictures from Tirana and the ban on foreign journalists travelling outside the capital. The authoritarian response, learnt during 45 years of isolation and dictatorship, cast doubt on President Berisha's commitment to press freedom and pluralist democracy, which are the foundations of all the European political, military and economic organisations Albania aspires to join.

The immediate outcry in the West appears to have forced the Albanians to think again. The Foreign Ministry now says that the press restrictions, promulgated in the state of emergency, do not apply to foreign news organisations. Television pictures may again be broadcast from Albania. The heavy-handed turning back of journalists at police blocks on roads leading out of Tirana has been replaced with official "advice" that travel in the south was unsafe.

There has been no let-up, however, in the restrictions on local media. Indeed, the most sinister development has been the increasing intimidation, not only of the press but of all opposition activists. Behaving with the same ruthlessness that made Enver Hoxha's secret police among the most hated in any dictatorship, Shik plainclothes thugs have been threatening foreign and domestic journalists, smashing their cars and inciting

crowds to turn on those suspected of reporting the violence. Under the cover of darkness and curfew, Shik agents have set fire to newspaper buildings. No wonder more than half the population now listen to the BBC to try to find out what is going on.

The Albanian Government accuses foreign journalists of inciting violence. To impute such a motive betrays a feeble grasp of impartial reporting, a concept that had no meaning in Albania's postwar history and is, clearly, still deeply suspect, especially to Mr Berisha. It is not likely to become clearer to him now. Violence has fed on the attention it has drawn to the protesters' grievances, he must. Former Communists, opportunists and criminals have taken advantage of the popular anger, and copycat looting and burning has quickly led to anarchy. Ancient tribal enmities between the Tosks in the north, where Mr Berisha draws his support, and the Ghegs in the south, where Hoxha came from, are also now a factor.

Mr Berisha is still the elected leader, although his wooden, surreal re-election on Monday by parliamentary acclaim had all the pretence of an old-style dictatorship. The ultimatum to the rioters and armed gangs now roaming the south to hand over their weapons is justified, though hopes of restraint by the police and army are probably not. The cost of the upheaval is already incalculable, and Albania's fumbling attempts to escape grinding poverty will be set back years. Democracy is staggering in Europe's poorest country. If it is not to be stifled altogether, free voices must be restored to print and the airwaves.