

Albania cuts links with world

Clampdown on press and protests as chaos prevails

Joanna Robertson in Tirana

ALBANIA, until recently the most secretive society in Europe, retreated back behind closed doors yesterday.

Enraged by days of bloody rioting bordering on anarchy, the government in Tirana cracked down hard on its insurgent opponents, cut links to the outside world, imposed a night-time curfew and blackout on independent media, and empowered police to shoot to kill demonstrators.

The clampdown met with strident condemnation from the international community, even as foreigners were airlifted from the strife-torn south of the country by an Italian air force convoy.

But despite the ferocity of the regime's response to the unrest, fighting continued in the southern town of Fier between protestors from nearby Vlore and the Albanian army.

The state-run news said the violence was the result of an attack by "terrorist groups" on the military headquarters

Albania crackdown

- Police authorised to shoot without warning at anyone who throws objects at them or defies emergency regulations
- People not permitted to walk in groups of more than four
- Opposition parties prevented from meeting
- Newspapers must submit reports to the Defence Council before publication
- Foreigners given until 1pm yesterday to leave the south of the country
- Curfew in force from 7pm to 6am
- Anyone not carrying identification will be arrested
- Suspected criminals and terrorists may be detained without trial
- Roadblocks seal off Tirana

in Fier. Witnesses said the army did not seem to be fighting hard.

Reports from Vlore ceased during the day, as telephone lines were blocked off and links to mobile telephones cut.

As part of a severe clampdown on the press as well as its own citizens and political opposition, the government ensured that no further television pictures from Albania can now reach the outside world, closing down a European Broadcasting Union satellite used by foreign networks.

Britain was among the countries joining in the condemnation, with the Foreign Secretary, Malcolm Rifkind, protesting about the harassment of journalists and

calling for the observation of "democratic norms".

Even as the crackdown proceeded, Albania's president, Sali Berisha, was elected by his party's majority in parliament for a second five-year term yesterday, with only one vote against. When the result was announced, his deputies filled the chamber with cheers of "Berisha, Berisha" while supporters celebrated with victorious gunfire outside his Democratic Party headquarters.

The political opposition was neutralised and clueless as to how it should proceed. The state of emergency bans all political activity, including "all sport, cultural or union activity".

A leader of the opposition

Forum for Democracy said: "There is nothing we can do, we have been temporarily outlawed."

The country is now effectively run by the SHIK secret police, and its leader, General Bashkim Gazidede. The "Council of Defence" at the apex of this formerly opaque force now commands the interior ministry and, through it, the state of emergency.

In Tirana, the atmosphere was tense. Roadblocks were operating on all routes out of the capital. People wishing to travel had been instructed to obtain written permission from the police. Queues formed outside bakeries, as panic buying set in. Sacks of flour could be seen strapped to bicycles, as people pedalled off with supplies.

The southern town of Sarande yesterday was described as extremely tense, with heavily armed protestors firing into the air almost constantly. Two naval boats were reported as having been seized from the marine base, with demonstrators firing from the decks.

Protesters in Sarande phoned Mr Berisha yesterday. They said they did not want him as president, and told him if he sent his troops to their town they would kill them.

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Greek billionaire with Midas touch



John Latsis . . . started from humble beginnings

Profile

JOHN Latsis, the 86-year-old Greek billionaire who gave the Conservative Party £2 million for the 1992 general election, has prospered in well-to-do British circles despite a controversial past, *writes David Pallister.*

From humble origins as a farmer and seaman, he made his fortune in Saudi Arabia. His company, Petrola, is joint owner of one of Saudi Arabia's largest oil refineries at Rabigh, and from oil trading he moved into salvage and port construction projects.

In 1981 he bought the Palladian mansion Bridgewater House in St James's for £19 million and then spent £10 million on refurbishment. It has been used to host the Group of Seven conference of world leaders. He has also given £1 million to Prince Charles's Youth Business Trust. In 1991 he loaned his 497 ft yacht, third largest in the world, for the Wales's so-called second honeymoon.

He is noted for his friendship and support of the Greek fascist junta which ruled the country from 1967 to 1974. Pictures from the time show him in dark glasses warmly shaking the hand of the junta leader Col-

onel George Papadopoulos.

Such is his prominence in the Greek financial world that his name has entered the language — a latsis is someone who makes a fast drachma.

His gifts to Tories certainly seem to have opened doors. A year after its receipt, Mr Latsis was dining with Sir Denis and Lady Thatcher in the Palace Hotel, Gstaad.

Although a present giver on a lavish scale, Mr Latsis is said not to be too ideological in his old age. As one Greek critic put it in 1992: "Tell your Labour Party not to despair. If they get elected, they'll get their £2 million too."

Neighbours fear Albanian exodus

John Hooper in Rome

ITALIAN military helicopters swooped into the southern Albanian port of Vlore yesterday to rescue 36 foreigners from mounting violence in the area. Italian marines who provided cover for the operation said order had broken down and that a crowd had looted an arsenal.

The operation was mounted as Albania's European Union neighbours Italy and Greece expressed concern that the strife could unleash a wave of refugees and renew instability elsewhere in the volatile Balkans.

Both countries pressed for urgent action, co-ordinated by the EU. But an Italian report from Brussels suggested that a meeting of senior officials to discuss the crisis was unlikely before tomorrow.

Coastguards on Italy's Adriatic coast were put on alert to meet a possible exodus. In Athens the deputy foreign minister, Yiannos Kranidiotis, said the Greek army was "keeping a close watch on the frontier with Albania". He added: "There is concern that there might be some mass movement."

A hint of the potential for trouble was given by the Greek news agency ANA. It said an armed group had stormed into a military base at Vlore and seized a naval vessel. But the raiders had been unable to get the boat's motors working, and yesterday afternoon the vessel was said to be drifting in the Adriatic.

According to a statement from the Italian defence ministry, the evacuation of Vlore was carried out by two Italian army CH-47 Chinook transport helicopters, escorted by two AB 212 naval gunships. A platoon of marines, flown in on the helicopters, provided cover on the ground.

The evacuees — 21 Italians and 15 others from "friendly countries" — had gathered in Vlore on the advice of diplomats in Tirana. The entire operation lasted just eight minutes in Vlore, from the time the helicopters touched down.

Earlier yesterday the Albanian government told foreigners in the south to leave. An interior ministry statement said its advice applied to Vlore and the towns of Gjirokaster, Sarande and Fier.

"The ministry stressed that this is necessary for reasons of security," the state-run news agency ATA said.



The Italian defence ministry statement indicated that its evacuation operation took place little more than two hours after the expiry of the 2pm deadline laid down by the parliament in Tirana for "armed rebels" in the south to surrender their weapons or be shot without warning.

Passengers arriving from Tirana on yesterday's flight to Rome said the situation in the Albanian capital was much calmer.

The Italian owner of a clothing shop in Tirana said: "There is no need for an evacuation for us or for the inhabitants of the place. The situation is calm."

Greek frontier police reported limited movement across the Albanian border.

Most Albanians appeared too frightened to travel to the southern border, with armed gangs roaming the area.

Albanians poured across the frontier in 1990 and 1991 after the end of communist rule. The authorities estimate that some 350,000 Albanians now live in Greece, mostly illegally.

The situation is made more delicate for Greece by a large Greek ethnic minority in southern Albania, a source of friction between the two states in the past.

Memories are still fresh in Italy of the alarm six years ago when some 40,000 Albanians crammed on to rusty freighters and forced their way into Italian ports. Most were repatriated, but tens, possibly hundreds, of thousands of their compatriots have since entered the country — legally and illegally.

Large amounts of Italian money are at stake in the crisis. More than half of all foreign investment in Albania is Italian, and 60 per cent of Albania's trade is with Italy.

The speaker of the lower house of the Italian parliament, Luciano Violante, pointed to another connection: "The Italian underworld has been at work in Albania and so we too have contributed in a way to this situation," he said.

Italian politicians and officials tried yesterday to look beyond the immediate crisis to longer-term solutions. A foreign ministry spokesman said the challenge for the EU would be to find a way "to allow the country to grow in a healthy fashion both economically and politically".

Mr Kranidiotis said the ambassadors in Tirana of the 15 EU states were drawing up a report on the situation.

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Italian troops in the Puglia region and a security force patrol boat keep watch for Albanian illegal immigrants fleeing the emergency in their country

Countdown to anarchy

Jan 16: Government seizes 25.5 billion leks (£150 million) deposited in state banks by pyramid schemes.

Jan 26: Resulting protests spread to Tirana.

Jan 30: Opposition forms Forum for Democracy.

Feb 10: Six days of Vlore protests leave three dead.

Feb 15: Rallies across country demand government resign.

Feb 20: Vlore students launch hunger strike.

Feb 27: Democratic Party re-elects President Berisha.

Feb 28: Gunbattle in Vlore after townsfolk raid police armoury.

March 1: Protesters clash with riot police in Tirana, Berisha says government will resign.

March 2: Vlore protesters demand Berisha step down. Troops desert and police flee Sarande as rioters sack police headquarters.

Newspaper hit as Berisha gags media

Joanna Robertson in Tirana



Berisha announces tough clampdown on television

ARMED police were on guard yesterday outside the ransacked and gutted premises of Fidel's Cafe in Tirana, near the offices of Albania's only independent newspaper.

Fidel's, a popular meeting place for journalists and intellectuals — and recently the Albanian capital's news hub — had had its windows smashed and been set alight. Whoever had decided to burn down the offices of the Kona Jone newspaper in the early hours of yesterday morning had returned to finish the job.

Albania is now plunged into an information blackout. Last night the government ensured that no more television pictures would reach the outside world, closing down the last link from Tirana: a European Broadcasting Union sat-

ellite used by all foreign news works and stations.

The only sources of news available to Albanians — many of whom live in remote rural areas — are state-run radio and television.

The BBC Albanian Service had its FM signal blocked shortly before the Sunday evening news programme. But the BBC announced last night that it was extending its short-wave broadcasts. The Voice of America was silenced on Sunday night.

As the state of emergency was announced on Sunday, people turned for information to the satellite television Euro-News. But by yesterday morning the channel had faded into a crackling void.

The journalists of Kona Jone have been intimidated and threatened with violence for the past year. Their telephones were constantly cut off — a source of tired jokes

among regulars at Fidel's Cafe. Almost all have gone into hiding.

Britain's Foreign Secretary, Malcolm Rifkind, added to the international condemnation yesterday, demanding an immediate end to intimidation of journalists.

Mr Rifkind said: "I am deeply concerned by the reports of the intimidation of journalists, including British journalists, and of attempts to control the freedom of the media. This must stop now."

The International Press Institute in Vienna, which represents the media in 88 countries, condemned press restrictions in an open letter to President Sali Berisha.

The group of editors and publishers said: "The IPI strongly condemns the introduction by Albania's parliament of controls on the media. IPI believes that restrictions on the right of

news media to freely gather and distribute information are unacceptable, and urges your excellency to ensure that censorship of the media, both direct and indirect, is eliminated."

"It's just like under Enver Hoxha," an Albanian journalist said, referring to the former communist leader. "Only now we have tasted what true journalism is. It is too much to go back to lies. Too humiliating. Too infuriating."

Journalists here say the only newspapers likely to appear on the stands today will be those controlled by the ruling Democratic Party. It is these newspapers, particularly one called Albania, that publish scathing libel about local and foreign journalists.

Those who have an "editorial" dedicated to them know they are in for trouble — a former badge of esteem none will now want to wear.

Albania's pyramid politics

A coalition may be the only chance of averting civil war

THE ALBANIAN lottery has thrown the dice in a disarray which now threatens the surrounding region as well as undermining what remains of the country's own cohesion. This result was as predictable as the collapse of the financial pyramid schemes which led to the present crisis. Violence has been worst in the southern towns where the schemes were most popular. The shift back to despotic rule was also presaged not only in last year's rigged elections but in the experience of earlier history. The anti-communist President Berisha, re-elected yesterday by his own packed parliament, now rules by means just about as democratic as those of the former President Enver Hoxha.

A nation which emerged so suddenly from decades of peculiar repression was always going to find the transition a difficult one. The mixture of Stalinism flavoured with Maoism and clothed in the fierce nationalism of Europe's poorest country was poisonous enough. The false expectations of a new capitalist dawn only made it more deadly. The pyramid schemes were not, at their outset, wholly fantastic, and primed as they were with cash from drugs, organised crime and sanction-busting into Serbia, they did result in a primitive form of redistribution. Many of those who took part knew it was a desperate gamble — except for the government ministers who promoted them in order to recoup their expenses for the elections which they rigged last year. But if it was an illusion, then the Albanians

have been accustomed to living in an illusory world.

Mr Berisha has been treated mildly by the European nations and the US for a mixture of reasons. He has escaped censure partly because he avoided inflaming the spirit of pan-Albanian nationalism which might easily cause insurrection in Serbian Kosovo and among the Albanian minority in Macedonia. But he has also been treated indulgently because of his anti-communist credentials. The result is that his parliament, from which the bulk of the ex-communist Socialists are excluded, has no power to mediate the present crisis. Instead it spent yesterday in a meaningless exercise, protected by armed police, to "re-elect" Mr Berisha for another five-year term.

Yesterday the protest leaders in Vlore were showing restraint by urging their followers to stay at home today and not risk more violence. But it would be unrealistic to suppose this can last: Albanian political tradition has little experience of the middle ground between conformity and violence. Mr Berisha's allegations about armed communist rebels, helped by foreign espionage services, may be absurd but an internal rebellion is now a real possibility. Foreign pressure must be brought to bear upon the president to accept the reality: his government does not control half of the country and to pretend otherwise is suicidal. A coalition including the opposition is the only chance of defusing the risk of civil war.
