

Albania cuts TV link with world

BY MICHAEL BINYON, DIPLOMATIC EDITOR

PRESIDENT BERISHA of Albania last night blacked out television coverage of the mass unrest in the country, banning the BBC and other international media from sending pictures and clamping down on domestic coverage.

State-controlled television was restricted yesterday to repeated showings of the President's re-election by Tirana's rubber-stamp parliament.

The ban followed the declaration of a state of emergency. Tirana was able to enforce the blackout by halting the only satellite television feed from the capital. The European Broadcasting Union link, serving about 25 Western companies and channels including the BBC, was shut down at 5.30 GMT.

The BBC, whose radio broadcasts in Albanian have become a vital source of news in the country, announced

yesterday that it was extending its short-wave broadcasts, following the closure of its FM transmitter on Mount Dajti in central Albania. Starting yesterday, three daily short-wave broadcasts were added from Britain and Cyprus.

The BBC rejected allegations by Pavli Qesku, the Albanian Ambassador to London, who accused it of inciting violence. The BBC said it had scrupulously observed its tradition of impartiality, balance and fairness.

The International Press Institute condemned Albania's move to restrict press freedom as unacceptable.

Last night Italian military helicopters evacuated 36 people from the southern city of Vlore, including 20 Italians.

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Shoot-to-kill crackdown in Albania

FROM RICHARD OWEN
IN TIRANA

PRESIDENT Berisha was re-elected by Albania's rubber-stamp parliament yesterday and immediately moved to crush the armed rebellion against his rule in the south with an "iron fist", ordering security forces to open fire on protesters who failed to lay down looted weapons.

Opposition leaders advised supporters to stay indoors in what amounts to martial law. But in the port of Vlore and other southern towns, lawlessness prevailed. Gunfire filled the streets as people let loose volleys from weapons captured from police arsenals. "We are the government," thousands chanted in Vlore. But they called off a planned armed march on the capital "for fear of more bloodshed".

Parliament, dominated by Mr Berisha's Democratic Party, voted on Sunday night for the state of emergency after an explosion of violence. Protesters overran police stations and army barracks and seized weapons. In Vlore and Sarande, protesters controlled the streets. Mr Berisha's summer villa above Vlore was looted and set on fire.

Many Albanians blame the President and his party for failing to control fraudulent pyramid schemes in which tens of thousands have lost all their money. The revolt has gradually evolved into an uprising, and Mr Berisha's reelection — by MPs under the constitution — angered those who want him to step down or be put on trial.

Emergency regulations issued yesterday include a dusk-to-dawn curfew and restrictions on press freedom, with strict censorship. Any group of more than four people in the street will be regarded as an illegal gathering, and police have power to detain suspects for 48 hours



Italian coastguards patrol off Brindisi yesterday as fears grew of a mass arrival of Albanians. In 1991 tens of thousands of refugees crowded onto ferries and homemade rafts

without explanation or redress. Roadblocks appeared on all roads to the south.

No Albanian newspapers appeared yesterday. The offices of the main opposition newspaper, *Koha Jone*, were burnt and ransacked on Sunday night. Ben Blushi, the editor, said 30 suspected secret police agents, attacked with blowtorches. The paper would try to publish on underground presses to overcome "this information blackout".

The re-election of Mr Berisha for a five-year term was a foregone conclusion, given that his party has 122 of parliament's 140 seats. But it was not the happy event for which he might have hoped when first elected in 1992: troops with automatic weapons blocked off the scruffy gardens in front of the neo-classical building. Inside,

Democratic MPs — the ten Socialist members have boycotted parliament — stood and chanted "Sali Berisha". He vowed in his acceptance speech to "crush this uprising by Red terrorists". Heavy security prevented protests across Tirana. At one stage,

defiant last editorial. "If we must die, let it not be like pigs — there will be no peace in Vlore or in Albania as a whole as long as Berisha is still in power." The newspaper accused the European Union of turning a blind eye to Mr Berisha's crackdown. Foreign

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onlookers surrounding a car accident in the central Skanderbeg Square threatened to develop into a crowd big enough to stage a demonstration, but police appeared to disperse them. "This is the death knell of Berisha's hopes," said *Koha Jone* in a

reporters and broadcasters — many of whom have been assaulted by secret police agents — were ordered to leave Vlore by yesterday afternoon. The Government accuses Western broadcasters of exacerbating the situation by transmitting direct TV pic-

tures. Many Albanians have satellite dishes, or watch Italian and Greek television.

Albanians said they were having difficulty hearing the widely-trusted BBC Albanian Service. "We need the BBC more than ever," said Eduard, 20, a student on hunger strike. "Albania is closed to the outside world again."

Diplomats said it was not clear to what extent Mr Berisha could rely on the army of 60,000 men, a third of whom are conscripts. Their discipline is uncertain and — like the police — many have suffered pyramid-fund losses. The only reliable force is the secret police, or Shik. Its agents can be seen patrolling Tirana's streets at night with automatic weapons.

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President Berisha: pledge to rout "this rebellion"

Is Albania on Europe's conscience?

Enver Hoxha haunts Berisha's Tirana, reports **Richard Owen**

"Europe has let us down," said an Albanian journalist bitterly as he surveyed the burnt-out ruin of the offices of the main opposition newspaper, ransacked and set on fire on Sunday night. "What is Europe doing? The EU is fiddling while Albania burns."

In the beginning, the EU represented a dream of prosperity and democracy which seemed within grasp: now, after two months of rioting over fraudulent pyramid schemes, Albania faces economic and political collapse, with lawlessness in the streets. Instead of blaming themselves, Albanians who gullibly invested all they had in shady funds are turning against the European Union.

They are also turning against Sali Berisha, the Western-backed President whose re-election yesterday by an obedient parliament was a hollow victory, and may be followed by his overthrow. In the heady days after his ousting of the detested Communists in 1992, the gold stars of the EU were a ubiquitous symbol of hope, plastered on every wall and flown on every flagpole. Today, as Mr Berisha cracks down with a "shoot to kill" policy on an armed rising in the south of this mountainous Balkan country of 3.2 million people, the gold stars are looking tarnished.

It is becoming conventional wisdom in Tirana that the West, and the EU in particular,

should have "done more" to help Albania make the difficult transition from the desperate poverty of the communist years to pluralism and market forces. In vain do Western ambassadors in Tira-

na argue that they and the International Monetary Fund have repeatedly offered a cautious combination of technical expertise and investment. What was needed, critics say with hindsight, was an emergency aid programme to establish an infrastructure: decent roads rather than the rush to mobile phones and illusory quick riches.

Italian diplomats point out that Italy has at least tried to guide Albania, a former Italian colony, into the 20th century. As the Italian Deputy Foreign Minister, Piero Fassino, told me: "Many Albanian enterprises are backed by Italian money. But we have also quietly been trying to teach government and opposition to respect each other's legitimacy by getting them together for round-table debates."

This is the heart of the matter: all the former communist countries of south-eastern Europe, including Serbia and Bulgaria, have found the transition to democracy more problematic than the nations of Central Europe, where pre-communist democratic traditions linger. The EU, Albanians say bitterly, is prepared to spare time from its preoccupation with the single currency to welcome Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic into the Western fold, but the peasants of the Balkans are left outside the door.

In Albania, wartime Fascist

The resort to force has one possibly fatal weakness: many policemen and soldiers have lost money in the schemes, which partly explains why looters in the south have often encountered little resistance. The only force on which Mr Berisha can rely is the secret police, the SHIK, the backbone of the previous regime, which has adapted all too easily from Hoxha's communism to Mr Berisha's right-wing rule, beating up intellectuals who once dared to criticise Hoxha and who now criticise Berisha.

If Mr Berisha is brought down, there are honourable and liberal-minded people in the Forum for Democracy who might put Albania back on track. But the Forum was brought together only by the crisis, and if it came to power it would swiftly be revealed as a front for the Socialists, some of whom remain militant communists.

"Europe" has not only failed to mend the roads, but has failed to help Albania break a deep-rooted secret-police culture and replace it with the foundations of democracy. The likelihood is that southern Europe will pay the price as tens of thousands of desperate Albanians pour into Italy and Greece. Yesterday's airlift by the Italian navy of foreign nationals stranded in an Albanian port may prove just a foretaste of the exodus to come.

Europe has not helped to break the secret police culture

giant business empire with assets from bitumen mines to helicopters -- have built most of Albania's new hotels, supermarkets and petrol stations with government approval.

state cannot reimburse savers, since Albania has a budget deficit of \$260 million, and anyhow the rackets were private ones. But this is disingenuous: the tycoons who run pyramid schemes such as Vefa -- a