



E U R O P E

# Behind Rebel Lines

As NATO vacillates over military intervention in Macedonia, ethnic Albanians advance on the capital

By ANDREW PURVIS

**T**HE LIGHTS OF SKOPJE'S INTERNATIONAL airport twinkled invitingly on the valley floor, plainly visible to a small band of ethnic Albanian rebels as they wound their way up a rutted mountain track one night last week. In tow were six scraggly horses carrying 1,500 crisp new uniforms, food, and a sack full of mobile phones destined for new positions 10 km from the Macedonian capital. "Boom!" whispered a teenage recruit pointing excitedly at the runway below. "Boom, boom!" Later an irascible local commander in a camouflage T shirt and red beret, with the unsettling habit of firing his automatic weapon into the air when roused, elaborated for TIME: "We control the Skopje zone all the way to Kosovo," he said. "If we wanted to hit the airport or parliament we could."

The ethnic Albanian rebels who have brought Macedonia to the brink of war in the past four months may not have much to recommend them. Their methods are an odd mixture of ancient and new, their organization is slipshod and their motives inscrutable. But last week they succeeded in again grabbing the world's attention by advancing to within mortar distance of Skopje's airport, a critical rear supply base for NATO-led troops in Kosovo. Advancing, ac-

tually, may be too grand a term. They appeared in the hillside town of Aracinovo, like hyped-up genies, brandishing guns from a dented pickup truck after encountering only token resistance from Macedonia's notoriously thin-on-the-ground security forces.

But the threat to the capital and airport helped concentrate the minds of Macedonia's fragile governing coalition and of NATO, whose members for the first time raised the possibility of sending troops, though when and in what capacity is uncertain. Skopje is requesting military help to "decommission" the rebels, while the National Liberation Army, as the rebels call themselves, wants peacekeepers deployed "in the whole territory of Macedonia," possibly with a view to solidifying territorial gains. In the near term, NATO leaders are praying for a political solution: "The idea of committing troops is one that most nations are troubled over," said George W. Bush in Brussels. "We want to try a political settlement first."

Who doesn't? In Skopje, President Boris Trajkovski presented a Western-backed peace plan that would extend the current cease-fire, provide a partial

**DRIVEN:** Macedonian police restricted access to Aracinovo after rebels took control

amnesty for rebels who disarm and speed up efforts to grant ethnic Albanians equal rights. The plan has not been rejected by Albanian political parties, but it falls short of addressing rebel demands for direct involvement in talks and a place for their soldiers in a reconstituted national security force. "Totally unacceptable," snorted a government official.

If the impasse is edging Macedonia toward civil war, at one rebel stronghold last week recruits appeared blissfully unaware of the anxiety they had provoked. Lounging on picnic tables outside a 14th century monastery high on a bluff overlooking eastern Macedonia, several explained how, in their view, there was little to lose. "I am 25 and haven't worked a day in my life," said one, dragging on a cigarette. "What would I do if war ended tomorrow?" A dark-haired young woman, lugging a sniper rifle two-thirds her size, said her entire family had joined the fight except her mother, and she, explained the daughter, "is proud of us." In the hot summer sun they cleaned their weapons, listened to Albanian music on a car radio and burnished the NLA myth. One spraypainted the band's initials across the monastery's fading 600-year-old frescoes. "Greater Albania" marked an outer door. "If we had tanks we could go all the way to Bulgaria and Athens," bragged the 25-year-old, before being chided by a fellow soldier: "We are fighting only for our rights in Macedonia," said his companion, carefully.

Whatever its intentions, the NLA has found an easy target in Macedonia's "national unity" government, which in five weeks has shown itself incapable of run-

**“If we had tanks we could go all the way to Bulgaria and Athens.”**

ning a military campaign and introducing legislative changes at the same time. The E.U. says the government must come up with an initial package of reforms by June 25 or risk losing aid. But E.U. pressure is short on substance: cutting off Skopje now would

only deepen the crisis. All of which is making NATO nervous. Former U.N. ambassadors Richard Holbrooke and Jeane Kirkpatrick issued a joint statement urging bolder action. "NATO needs to make it clear ... that it will not allow Macedonia to be destroyed," they wrote. No argument there. The question is: how? —*With reporting by James Graff/Brussels and Joshua Kucera/Matejce Monastery*