

International intervention, aid program needed to stabilize Albania

by Konstantin George

Albania, the first European nation to have plunged into a process of outright disintegration as a result of International Monetary Fund (IMF) policies, is perched to fall into an even deeper level of chaos. The one prospect for even a fragile, very limited degree of stability, is, as of this writing, the planned arrival on April 14 of an International Protection Force, under Italian command, to assure the distribution of humanitarian and reconstruction aid. The final hurdle to permit its arrival was cleared when the Italian Senate and Chamber of Deputies approved the deployment, in votes on April 9 and 10. On April 8, the French contingent of the international force sailed from the French Navy's Mediterranean base in Toulon, and an advance party of French troops is expected to take up positions in the Albanian port of Durres before April 14.

The international force will consist of about 6,000 troops, with the largest contingent, 2,500, coming from Italy. France will provide 1,000 troops, and Greece 700 troops (Albania has officially asked for a larger Greek contingent); Turkey and Romania will provide 500 each, and smaller contingents will come from Spain, Portugal, Slovenia, Austria, and Hungary.

Relief supplies needed soon

The ravages of the IMF have left Albania bankrupt and with mere remnants of a physical economy. Unless international relief supplies arrive by late April or May, the country faces mass starvation. The relief supplies to be protected by the international force are primarily meant for south-central, central, and northern Albania. The southern third of the country is not included for two reasons: First, a major relief effort blanketing that area of Albania (and in some cases beyond), bringing in food, medicines, and other necessities, has been under way since the third week of March, through overland aid convoys from Greece. The relief action has been funded in part by the Greek government, but mostly through an outpouring of contributions from hundreds of thousands of Greek citizens, responding to a massive TV and radio campaign to help Albania. This campaign alone raised tens of millions of dollars, strangely enough receiving all but no coverage in the Western press.

The response of the Greek population is not surprising to anyone familiar with what has transpired in Greece during the 1990s. Greece houses about 400,000 Albanian guest workers (300,000 ethnic Albanians and 100,000 Albanian citizens of the ethnic Greek minority). Given that Albania's physical economy has been all but destroyed by the IMF, southern Albania lives on the remittances from these workers in Greece. Otherwise, the effectiveness of the Greek aid effort can be seen through the simple fact that to date, except for a few thousand who have been absorbed into Greek society, there has been no refugee exodus from southern Albania into Greece. The Greek aid effort is not a real solution, but it has bought critical time, and, for the time being, prevented the worst-case scenario from occurring.

The second reason why the aid channeled through the international force will not be earmarked for the southern third of Albania, is that none of the international participants wish to have their contingents stationed there. A passionate request from Albanian Prime Minister Bashkim Fino for Greece to do so, was politely turned down by the Greek government, which said that the risks are too high. Because of insistent Albanian requests, this position may change. The first indication in this direction came on April 8, when Greece agreed to station its contingent in the south-central port of Vlora.

Whatever limited containment of the crisis has been achieved so far, there are no grounds for complacency. The prospect of starvation and/or the next level of chaos could trigger a mass exodus of Albanians in all directions, including to the Republic of Macedonia. There, where tensions are already high between the republic's Slavic majority and its 30% Albanian minority, a mass influx of desperate, and possibly armed, Albanians, could ignite civil strife. This would lead to the southern Balkans nightmare scenario: a pre-war situation, characterized by a simultaneous conflict and disintegration sweeping both Albania and Macedonia.

In addition, there is the always-present danger of the tinderbox represented by Kosova, the region of Serbia with a 90% ethnic Albanian majority, which has suffered brutal repression under Serbia's fascist Milosevic regime since 1989, when Kosova's autonomy was revoked.

Efforts to contain the crisis

The danger of spreading chaos has sparked a major international effort, in addition to the International Protection Force, to contain the Albanian crisis. Most noteworthy has been the historic reconciliation between Greece and the Republic of Macedonia. This occurred, with full U.S. backing, during a visit to Macedonia's capital of Skopje by Greek Foreign Minister Theodoros Pangalos on March 19. There, he and Macedonia's President Kirill Gligorov agreed that Greece and Macedonia would set aside differences, and work together to stabilize the region. The urgency of the reconciliation was highlighted on the day of their meeting, when the Bulgarian news agency, BTA, made public what both Athens and Skopje had already known: that large quantities of arms, including Kalashnikovs and Makarov pistols, plundered from military garrisons in southern Albania, had made their way into Macedonia, and across Macedonia, flooding the bazaars of Bulgaria.

Also with clear U.S. backing, efforts are under way on the Kosova front. For the first time since Serbian dictator Slobodan Milosevic began his repression against Kosova, talks between Serbs and ethnic Albanians to defuse tensions in Kosova began in New York on April 8 and continued on April 9. At the meeting were representatives of most Serbian and Kosova Albanian parties. The glaring exception was the Socialist Party of Milosevic, which angrily boycotted the talks.

Splits widen on all fronts

In Albania, the Army and Navy no longer exist, and the same is true concerning the police. The state and whatever was left of the economy, have disintegrated. The country has been de facto partitioned since early March into a southern Albania, uncompromisingly opposed to the "Project Democracy" creature who is Albania's President, Sali Berisha, a man who, until all hell broke loose, had been hailed by the IMF as their "model pupil" in the Balkans. Since early March, all the districts of the southern half of Albania have been in the hands of various rebel groups, which in each district have formed "Citizens Committees." The districts of northern Albania, Berisha's home region and his base of support, is under the control of pro-Berisha armed "volunteer" units, supplemented by the units of the SHIK, Berisha's secret police.

The line of partition follows the course of the Shkumbin River, the traditional divide between northern and southern Albania. However, except for a broad pro- or anti-Berisha sentiment, there is no politically coherent "north" or "south." Each district has its own regional leadership, and within each district, there are competing armed gangs, including the criminal element.

At the top, the government is nominally the "all-party" government formed in March, headed by Prime Minister Bashkim Fino, from the anti-Berisha opposition Socialist

Party, with a cabinet divided between Fino's and other opposition parties, and Berisha's Democratic Party. Alongside the all-party government, remains Berisha as President. President and prime minister, and the cabinet, are as hopelessly split as the country.

Rupture of the 'all-party' government

The split between Berisha and the Socialist Party component of the government has been widening since mid-March, to the point where an open rupture could occur at any time. If the international force doesn't arrive, the rupture is all but certain.

The President and the prime minister are operating on two different agendas. Berisha is counting on the limited stability that relief supplies would bring to the north, to continue using what remains of state funds to recruit enough armed units for the purpose of ultimately crushing the rebellion and restoring his unopposed rule in the country. Prime Minister Fino is eager to reach a political agreement with the rebel committees in the south, because this would pave the way for restoring a semblance of order there. Without agreement with the rebels, the preconditions won't exist for holding elections in June, as stipulated in the formation of the all-party government. As both Fino and Berisha know, elections in June mean the end for Berisha, and their maneuvers have been governed accordingly.

This is why Berisha has blocked any negotiations between Prime Minister Fino and the rebel "Citizens Committees" that run the districts of southern Albania. This stance, along with Berisha's refusal to resign, has maintained the de facto partition of Albania, which in turn blocks elections. The stance has also precipitated a rebel escalation, visible in the context of the March 28-29 first meeting of all the "Citizens Committees" in the town of Vlora. The committees reiterated their demand that Berisha step down, as the condition for negotiations with the Tirana government, with the goal of ending the country's partition. They were joined in this demand by figures from the Socialist Party who attended the proceedings.

Then, on March 30, Berisha for the first time threatened openly to torpedo the all-party government. He declared that unless Prime Minister Fino and the Socialists "distance themselves" from the southern "Citizens Committees" (a strange formulation, as it was in reluctant compliance with Berisha's orders that Fino and his supporters in the cabinet had not held any talks with the rebels till that date), he would pull the Democratic Party (his party) members out of the cabinet, in effect dissolving the government. Another fight that has erupted into the open, and which further shows how fragile this all-party government is, concerns the June elections, which all sides have agreed to in principle. The issue is, under what election law will they occur? Fino and the Socialist Party insist on proportional representation. Berisha has rejected this outright.

Reconstruction assistance needed

The chain of escalation did not stop there. Fino successfully defied Berisha's ultimatum, flying by helicopter to the southern rebel stronghold of Gjirokaster, in a mission that was clearly backed by the European Union. From there, he flew to Athens, accompanied by five ministers, for two days of talks with the Greek government and with representatives of the EU and Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, led by Netherlands Foreign Minister Hans Van Mierlo and former Austrian Chancellor Franz Vranitzky, respectively. From Greece, Albania procured an \$80 million reconstruction credit, the first credit since the crisis began, and an agreement was reached by which Greece will help reconstruct Albania's police force, and provide similar assistance in rebuilding at least the skeleton of an Army. Two high-ranking Greek police officials were dispatched to Tirana by Greek Police Minister Romaios, for talks on the matter.

Meanwhile, within Albania, the split between President Berisha and Prime Minister Fino continued as deep as ever. On April 5, after a cabinet meeting, Fino left Tirana with a cabinet motorcade, in his first attempt to visit the north of Albania since becoming prime minister. He intended the trip as a "reconciliation" attempt, a followup to his trip to the southern rebel stronghold of Gjirokaster the week before, as

part of the attempt to reunite the country, and, among other things, to allow elections to be held in June. The motorcade was stopped by a group of armed men—typical of the armed pro-Berisha gangs, de facto ruling in much of the north—short of its destination, the northern city of Shkoder. Two hand grenades were hurled in front of the motorcade, and shots were fired in the air. Fino and his ministers had to turn back to Tirana. Fino declared he had wanted "to show that I am the prime minister of all Albania, and the head of the government of national reconciliation. If a prime minister cannot enter a city, what will happen to the representative of a political party during the election campaign?"

Barring a breakthrough in the policy of the United States and Europe, nothing will stabilize inside Albania, and a spill-over of the crisis will remain a constant danger. What Albania needs minimally, is a "Marshall Plan" type of international reconstruction aid project. Nothing short of that will save Albania, and, by saving Albania, spare the entire Balkans the ultimate horror. For a country with an official population of only 3.3 million (in actuality, a good deal less than 3 million, given the mass exodus of the 1990s), the "cost," even in nominal accountants' terms, would be trivial. Otherwise, any complaints about cost should be answered with the question: What would be the cost of a Balkan war?

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