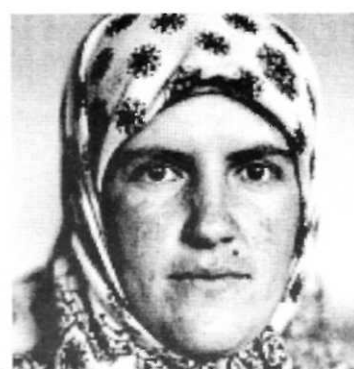


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Images of Kosova: the Mejzimi Family

KLA seeks democratic credentials by forming a political party

By James Pettifer, in Pristina

Pristina was quiet but tense yesterday in the aftermath of last week's shootings of two Albanians by British paratroopers from the NATO intervention force. But in the filthy, dark, and waterless Grand Hotel, there was a meeting of potentially momentous importance for the future of Kosovo.

At the hotel, once owned by Serb war criminal Arkan, and now taken over by the Kosovo Liberation Army, the KLA general staff met and dissolved its military organisation to transform itself into a political party, the Party of Democratic Unity.

In the absence of any government after the war the KLA is hoping to become the effective government of Kosovo. The move to become a political party formalises the situation where the soldiers from the mountains have filled a political vacuum left by departing Serbs. Bardhyl Mahmuti, a right-hand man of the KLA leader Hashim Thaci, a tall, quiet man who cut his political teeth building up the clandestine KLA in Switzerland will lead the PDU.

A strange parade of uniformed soldiers, brown-skinned from months in the hills, mingled with the dignified village elders with great white moustaches to rubber stamp their leader's decision. The party programme puts forward a free market westernised economy, privatisation, and a pluralistic political system.

What role the 5 percent of Serbs left in Kosovo will have is not clear. A surprising number of Serbs are resurfacing in Pristina, many still belligerent and said to be heavily

armed. Yesterday morning unconfirmed reports of more serious KLA violations of Serbian religious monuments reached Pristina from a monastery near the Serbian border.

Elsewhere in Kosovo, hundreds of Turkish army soldiers entered Prizren in scenes of wild jubilation from the Albanian and ethnic Turkish inhabitants. A local Turkish newspaper put it as a historic event, recalling the entry of the Ottoman army into Prizren 610 years ago. Children caught packets of food tossed from the army trucks and in a wild street party, huge red Turkish flags billowed over Prizren's bridges, with smaller KLA banners.

What is clear is as the honeymoon period ends for NATO, component section of the force will come under intense local pressure to follow separate political agendas, something that will cause concern at NATO HQ in Brussels, particularly with the imminent arrival of more Russian soldiers. Moscow said yesterday it had ended a standoff with NATO that had blocked the departure of Moscow's main Kosovo peacekeeping contingent. The Russian peacekeepers were grounded over the weekend in Bulgaria, Romania, and Hungary, at NATO's request, denied them an air corridor.

Ethnic Albanian mourners in the Kosovo village of Bellacerke yesterday buried 65 men, women, and children killed by Serbs on 25 March. The dead included four children of the Spahiu family aged three; four, seven, and 12 and three children of the Zhiniqi family aged five, seven and nine. ■

