

22 November 2001

Happy Thanksgiving!

Just wanted to let you all know I'm alive and well, and enjoying my day off. Hope you're enjoying the holiday weekend.

Macedonia's in the news again, as you may have noticed. There was an ugly incident last week where three members of the special forces were killed by guerrillas. The how and why is kind of a long story – I think I mentioned in my last dispatch that the speaker of the parliament was delaying the debate on constitutional change until the whereabouts of all missing Macedonian citizens were determined. A few weeks ago, the local press started reporting rumors that there was a mass grave outside a village near Tetovo, where some or all of the 12 missing people had been executed and buried. Last Sunday, the interior minister sent “special forces” in to secure the area, which is still technically under Albanian control. At some point, 7 ethnic Albanians were arrested for weapons possession. It's not clear whether the arrest or the entry of the military were the primary goals, but two separate attacks on military/police units in the area resulted in 3 deaths and serious casualties. The attackers also took a lot of civilians hostage – they apparently intended to use them to negotiate the release of the arrested Albanians. The international community kicked into high pressure mode and negotiated the release of the civilians, and started putting pressure on the political parties again. On Friday, the changes to the constitution were finally ratified.

Things were tense late last week – it wasn't clear whether the ratification of the constitutional amendments would happen, and there were rumors that some major action would take place in conjunction with the elections in Kosovo over the weekend. Plus, there were concerns among the Albanians that Macedonian irregulars would retaliate for the attacks, either in the villages, or in Tetovo. And, of course, there were constant minor violations of the cease-fire, as there have been ever since it was put into effect. Then on Sunday, a large bomb went off in the green market in Tetovo. Two more bombs were reported in Tetovo on Tuesday, near the EU monitoring mission. It's not clear whether the EU office was the target or not.

The Albanian National Army (ANA) claimed responsibility for the attacks on the military, the kidnappings, and some of the bombings. The ANA first appeared on the scene late last summer, and it looked to be a wacko fringe group – more talk than action. Their demands and their rhetoric were much more extreme than the NLA (they say they're fighting for the partition of Macedonia, among other things). The relationship between the ANA and the NLA is, like basically everything else about the situation in Macedonia, unclear. But the ANA definitely seems to have acquired more man- and gunpower since the end of Essential Harvest and the disbanding of the NLA.

As if things weren't interesting enough, Carla Del Ponte, the chief prosecutor of the International Criminal Tribunal (the war crimes court) is in town to investigate allegations of war crimes committed both by the guerrillas and the military. The exhumation of the alleged mass grave is underway, and there are conflicting reports of whether human remains have been found or not. The exhumation is being done by a mixed Macedonian government/EU/OSCE/NATO team, and reporters are not being

22 November 2001

allowed onsite. But the absence of facts has never stopped the press from coming up with a story.

The latest news is the dissolution of the National Unity government coalition that was formed in August for the purpose of negotiating and pushing the peace agreement through parliament. The main opposition party (SDSM) and another smaller party have pulled out of the government. It wasn't an entirely unexpected event – elections are coming up early next year, and this move is seen as a strategic attempt by the parties to distance themselves from the government. But it leaves the VMRO in charge and they've gone increasingly nationalistic over the last few months. So things remain interesting.

As for me, personally, well, life has been far from dull. Tonight, CRS' country representative and his family are hosting Thanksgiving dinner – all-out traditional American – turkey, stuffing, mashed potatoes, cranberry sauce. The only thing missing will be the family fight. And the Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade.

Happy Christmas shopping!