

March 2001

My last message may have been a little premature. I sent it before the situation in Tetovo came up. Tetovo is the second largest city in Macedonia, and has a majority Albanian population. Well, the day I left for Bulgaria, there was a demonstration to protest against discrimination against Albanians in Macedonia. I've already mentioned that relations between the Albanian and Macedonian communities have often been difficult. On the day of the protest, many of the guerrillas moved down from the border to the outskirts of Tetovo. That's where the majority of the fighting has taken place since. So far, the guerrillas have remained in the hills outside of Tetovo, while the Macedonian army has been moved into the city proper. Most of the fighting has consisted of the army shelling the guerrillas' positions in the hills, which isn't terribly effective against small, mobile, armed groups. So far, there haven't been any direct confrontations, but the government is making noises about "neutralizing" the conflict. Naturally, this has raised tensions. If there are direct confrontations and increased casualties (so far, casualties have remained low on both sides), the situation could deteriorate further. Earlier this week, the government told the guerrillas to withdraw, or face further military measures. The guerrillas offered a cease-fire to negotiate their demands (these include making Albanian an official language, and other measures that center around revisions to the Macedonian constitution), but did not withdraw. The government rejected their offer and resumed shelling. But from what I've seen, things have remained fairly quiet this week. The international community is urging the government to show military restraint, expressing justified concerns that an intensification of the conflict could result in deeper divisions in Macedonia.

When the fighting first broke out on the border, it appeared that the guerrillas were ex-members of the Kosovo Liberation Army, and the government has maintained that the guerrillas are predominantly an external force. But as the conflicts continued, other reports have maintained that the majority of the fighters are Macedonian Albanians, and the guerrillas have consistently maintained that their goal is to reform the Macedonian constitution to increase parity for Macedonian Albanians, which seems to confirm that they are not an external force. However, it isn't quite clear that this is entirely a homegrown movement. Apparently, Macedonian Albanians crossed the border to join the KLA during the Kosovo conflict. The argument that seems to make the most sense to me is that the core of the movement is made up of ex-KLA members who are disappointed at the moderate turn that Kosovo took during the last elections (moderate parties were more successful than the political wing of the KLA), and who aren't ready to give up their guns yet. The support that they've generated in Macedonia appears to be mostly unemployed and disaffected young men (unemployment among young Albanian men in Macedonia is reported to be as high as 60%). There have been rumors that the "real" goal of the guerrillas is to win territory in Macedonia and merge it with Albania to form a Greater Albania in the Balkans (which would include Kosovo as well). Macedonian Albanians do have strong family connections in Albania and Kosovo, and there is a strong Albanian ethnic affinity. But, for what its worth, I tend to think that these strong connections could make Macedonian Albanians reluctant to support the idea of Greater Albania. Economically, both Albania and Kosovo are a mess -- Macedonian Albanians are in a better position, economically. The impression I've

gotten from talking to our local staff who are Albanian is that, while they're frustrated with the slowness of political and social change in Macedonia, they feel they're better off than friends and family in Kosovo and Albania.

As you can tell, this is a very confusing and frustrating situation, and as a newcomer and a foreigner, I can't claim any great understanding of inter-ethnic relations or the political situation in Macedonia. So I'm going to stop here and tell you about the new initiative that our office is supporting in response to the conflict. It's a silent campaign for peace. It was proposed by one of the national staff, and it borrows from the AIDS awareness red ribbon campaign. An ad appeared in all the local papers today asking people to wear a blue ribbon in support of peace. And there's a rock concert tonight that's also in support of peace. Our staff will be there, handing out blue ribbons. Hopefully, this will catch on and give people who want a peaceful resolution to the conflict an outlet for expression. The government has banned all public demonstrations, so even if people wanted to hold a peace rally, they couldn't. The campaign was announced on Thursday, and by Friday afternoon we heard that local sports teams wanted 500 ribbons and that an anonymous local donor wanted to fund the entire ad campaign. One of our national staff also gave a ribbon to a press secretary for the Macedonian president. And our media advisor gave an interview about the campaign to Vatican Radio, which is second only to the BBC in its number of international listeners. It seems like an encouraging start.