

12 Aug 2001

The news out of Macedonia hasn't been so good this week. There have been more deaths this week than at any time since the conflict started. On Tuesday, the army raided a house in a suburb of Skopje and killed 5 Albanians and seized a large cache of weapons. Wednesday, in what appeared to be a retaliatory attack, the guerillas attacked a military convoy and killed 10 soldiers. That night, there was a riot in Skopje that ended with several downtown businesses being trashed. The cafe where T. and I usually stop to get ice cream on our way home from work was one of them. The tables and umbrellas outside were completely trashed, and someone had picked up a potted shrub and thrown it through the ice cream case.

What's even more disturbing is that apparently it wasn't the NLA ("National Liberation Army") that carried out the attack on the convoy. A group calling itself the Albanian National Army claimed responsibility. So now, there are apparently at least two groups of guerrillas, and no one knows what links, if any, there are between the two.

Seven soldiers were killed on Friday, when their truck hit a land mine on the road. Police also discovered a large amount of explosives on the road from Skopje to Tetovo. Friday night, there was another riot in which more businesses were attacked, and a crowd headed toward the American embassy, but was turned back. I haven't been downtown this weekend, so I don't know how bad the damage was, but the results of the destruction and looting earlier in the week were pretty ugly.

The fighting in general has been very bad this week. I woke up one morning to the sound of fighter jets, which was the first I'd heard them. The military started bombing the guerrillas' positions this week, and using the helicopter gunships more often. And apparently my house is directly in the line of flight from the airport to Tetovo, because the helicopters have been flying right over my house all week. It gives me the creeps.

On the other hand, the news coming from the peace negotiations in Ohrid has generally been positive. There was one hiccup where the government demanded that the guerrillas be disarmed before the agreement could go into effect, but then they retracted that demand. It looks like the agreement will be signed tomorrow. As a goodwill gesture, the government instituted a unilateral cease-fire that took effect a few hours ago. But it's only in effect as long as the guerrillas don't fire on the military. Considering that the previous bilateral ceasefire was regularly violated, I'm not terribly hopeful that this one will last.

President Trajkovski has said that he doesn't think that signing the peace agreement is going to make much of a difference in the situation. The guerrillas' actions seem to indicate that their goal is to gain territory. They violated the original cease-fire agreement by repeatedly taking more territory. There were reports of them attempting to provoke the military into violating the cease-fire as well. At the end of the week, five construction workers (4 Macedonian and 1 Roma) who had been abducted and reportedly tortured by the guerrillas were released, but apparently there are other members of their group still being held.

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What worries me the most, though, is that the polarization between the Macedonian and Albanian population is becoming increasingly evident. Before, it was happening, but it was kind of happening under the surface. Now, it's very obvious. At least when the rioters were attacking Western organizations, the focus of their anger was largely external. Now that it's been turned on internal targets, it looks even uglier and more dangerous.

I'm safe enough. I don't live close enough to the center of town or the American embassy for my neighborhood to see any trouble. We've been put on alert to be ready to evacuate quickly if we need to, but so far the anti-Western sentiment hasn't been focused against NGOs or individuals, so I don't feel like we're in any immediate danger. And if it looks like we are, or will be, we'll be evacuated. Unfortunately, this creates its own problems in the office, because the national staff don't have that escape route. It creates a barrier. Everyone understands that that is the policy, but it doesn't make it any easier to deal with, and our national staff are under a lot of stress. Everyone has friends or family who are directly affected by the conflict. The level of stress in the office has risen greatly over the past week. There are days when very little work gets done because everyone is worrying about what's going to happen next.

It's been a difficult week, and it's very hard to predict what the coming days will bring. I'll keep you all updated.