

Well, the past few weeks have been sort of mixed, in terms of news. If you've been watching the news from Macedonia, what you've probably been seeing the most of is stories about the progress of the weapons collection and the Parliamentary debate. Surprisingly, the Parliamentary debate came off peacefully enough. We were all braced for a weekend of riots, but aside from crowds of protesters keeping some MPs from getting into the Parliament building on the first day of the debates, Skopje was pretty quiet.

I was bemused by all the fuss about these debates in the international press. When the hard-liners held up the debate because a group of guerrillas were keeping a convoy of Macedonians from revisiting their homes in guerrilla-controlled territory, you would've thought the end of the world was at hand. Granted, it would've been bad if the peace agreement had been voted down, but what the Parliament was debating and voting on was whether or not to begin debate about incorporating the 36 constitutional changes outlined in the peace agreement. That's right, they were debating about whether to debate the necessary constitutional changes. So we're not out of the woods yet.

NATO's mission is supposed to be done on 26 September, but a week ago the murmurs about extending the mission got started. The guerrillas are in favor, the Macedonian government is opposed. Nobody is surprised. What do you expect when they bring over 4,000 troops into a country to collect 3,300 voluntarily surrendered weapons? Now the EU is talking about how the monitors that are going to be sent to Macedonia to train and help integrate the police force (among other things) will need military support. Granted, it's nothing close to the scale of the operations in Bosnia and Kosovo, but it looks like NATO is going to be around for awhile.

Possibly the ugliest story to come out recently was the implication of the Minister of the Interior and the government's special forces in the deaths of several Albanian civilians in the village of Ljuboten. Human Rights Watch issued a report last week condemning the minister and the "Tigers" special forces for killing civilians and destroying property in an attack on the village at the end of August. The minister is denying the allegations, saying that there was proof that there were guerrillas operating out of the village and that no civilians were killed. Now there are conspiracy theories saying that he was framed (this is the guy who the conspiracy theories from a few weeks ago were implicating in the hotel bombing in Tetovo) by the West. Lately, it seems like there are six versions of any given story.

Last week, the local "human interest" story from the crisis was an open letter written by a group of Albanian school children and delivered to the TV station in Tetovo. In the letter, the kids said that they wouldn't return to school until their Macedonian friends could come to class as well. They demanded an end to the violence and mistreatment of Macedonians. But this week's school story comes from a school in Tetovo where Albanian students are boycotting classes, demanding separate classes for Albanians and Macedonians. School hasn't started yet in several towns because displaced families are still living in the student dorms, and there's no word yet as to when classes are expected to start.

10 Sept 2001

More local news stories:

The director of the Skopje Museum asked NATO not to destroy the collected weapons, but to donate them to the Skopje Museum, because of their historical and museum value. The weapons would be a valuable addition to the Museum's collection of weapons from the Balkan War, WWI and WWII, according to the director.

On Friday, the local press staged an event outside of Parliament. It was called "Harvesting the Melons," which apparently is a Macedonian expression for "we're in deep shit." The organizers called on all the citizens of Skopje to surrender their weapons – rotten vegetables, toy guns, kitchen knives, rolling pins, slingshots, etc -- to be handed over to NATO to be destroyed. Some of my friends told me that it was pretty funny. One woman made a slingshot from an old bra, and somebody stuck a long piece of pipe out of the hood of a beat-up Yugo and labeled it "Tank." And there was a picture in one of the newspapers of two NATO soldiers holding watermelons, so apparently at least part of the "arsenal" got delivered. (Others were not so amused. See this story http://www.iwpr.net/index.pl?archive/bcr/bcr_20010911_3_eng.txt for opposing points of view.)

I'm leaving Friday for a week in Egypt (a training and a bit of sightseeing), so keep your fingers crossed that everything stays calm and I'll be able to get back into the country.