

Kosovo Serbs: “If The Americans Want To Kill Me, Then Go Ahead”

Kosovo Serbs dig in as border dispute turns bloody

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-Serbs accuse Nato troops, specifically Americans, of using live ammunition to disperse people who were protesting against ethnic-Albanian Kosovo police efforts to take control of customs points along the border with Serbia - a frontier that local Serbs insist they will never recognise.

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Mileva Premovic and her neighbours while away the afternoon in the shade of a broad tree. The unseasonable warmth makes it hard to imagine that the green Kapaonik mountains, rising up a few miles away in Serbia, will soon be white with snow and busy with skiers.

It would also be hard to believe that bullets were fired and blood shed here just a few days ago, were it not for the scars that blight Kosovo’s border zone.

Nearby fields are burned black from recent rioting and, just over the rise, US soldiers move warily behind a huge earth barricade and glinting coils of barbed wire. They warn off anyone approaching their position while they are still hundreds of metres away, their rifles clearly showing.

“It was frightening to see the demonstrators running, tumbling over each other to get away,” Premovic says of Tuesday’s clashes between Serbs and Nato troops. “There were hundreds of local people, young and old, and I could hear gunfire - tap-tap-tap. If the Americans want to kill me, then go ahead, I have nowhere else to go. But this has always been Serb land; there have never been Albanians here.”

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Tuesday’s violence injured at least six Serbs and four Kfor soldiers, ramped up tension in northern Kosovo, and prompted the postponement of EU-brokered talks between Belgrade and Pristina to solve practical problems stemming from Kosovo’s 2008 independence declaration.

The Belgrade government, like most Serbs, refuses to recognise the sovereignty of Kosovo,

which from 1999-2008 was run by the UN after Nato bombing forced Slobodan Milosevic's forces to withdraw from the region...

Many Serbs fled Kosovo after the 1998-1999 war and the 100,000 that remain are divided between almost entirely Serb northern regions and enclaves in the south where they are surrounded by Kosovo's 90 per cent ethnic Albanian majority.

Serbs in northern Kosovo refuse to acknowledge the authority of the Pristina government and still look to Belgrade for political leadership, protection and finance.

In a bid to tighten control of the rebellious north, Pristina dispatched special police to take over custom points in July. Local Serbs resisted and killed one of those policemen.

The row has rumbled on, and this week's clashes came when Kfor troops tried to clear barricades built by Serbs across local main roads and to block one of the many rough tracks that they use to bypass official checkpoints and enter Serbia.

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About a dozen Serbs sit in the sun, eating, drinking and making gentle fun of the Greek Kfor troops watching them from behind barbed wire. The Serbs insist they are neither radicals nor puppets of the local mafia, but patriots who refuse to be dictated to in their ancient homeland.

"We want to remain part of Serbia.

"I live on my grandfather's land, but this situation means I have to hope my kids find a future in Belgrade or Europe. That's the sad truth," says Sladjan Radosavljevic from the nearby village of Leposavic, home to many of the protesters.

"Serbs are disappearing everywhere," he adds. "Croatia, Macedonia, and they are under pressure in Montenegro. What could we possibly hope for from the Albanians?"

Offering food and strong home-made rakia to visitors, local man Stanko Lakic brandishes a fork and insists it is the protesters' deadliest weapon.

"Every river has a source and every nation has its birthplace. The birthplace for every Serb is Kosovo.

"And what happens when a river loses its source? It disappears," he says.

"But Serbs will never leave Kosovo.

"No price and no amount of violence will force us out."

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