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Serb extremists urge war over Kosovo independence

BELGRADE, Serbia, Nov 21 (AFP) -- A Serbian extremist group which claims to have thousands of militant members Wednesday lodged a call to arms with the Serbian government in the event Kosovo declares independence.

"We have handed over to deputies a call to go to war over Kosovo," said Hadzi Andrej Milic, the leader of the so-called Tsar Lazar Guard.

He was speaking to journalists outside the Serbian parliament after submitting a document that warned "a violent invasion will follow in the case of a unilateral declaration of independence" by Kosovo's ethnic Albanians.

"We demand the Serbian army and police immediately return to enclaves and protect the population in a peaceful way," said Milic.

"If that agreement is not reached, the Tsar Lazar Guard will return in a way it has to," Milic said, adding the guard had the "technical capacity" to shell the Kosovo provincial capital Pristina.

Milic, who was flanked by only three young men, claims the guard has 5,000 members in each of Serbia's regional councils.

"We are not a paramilitary formation because we have not yet acted and we are at the disposal of the Serbian military and police," said Milic, who announced a rally on the administrative border with Kosovo on November 28.

The gathering, which he said would be peaceful, was to be held on the final day of the last round of talks on the future status of Kosovo, a disputed southern province of Serbia.

Under pressure from the West, leaders of Kosovo's ethnic Albanian majority this week toned down threats of making a unilateral proclamation of independence in the likely event the negotiations fail.

Named after 14th century Serbian Prince Lazar, the guard was formed in May by a group of nationalists in Krusevac, the southern town which was Lazar's capital.

On June 28 -- the 618th anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo in which Prince Lazar died fighting Ottoman Turks -- the UN mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) banned the group from entering the province to commemorate the battle.

In September, the guard sent UNMIK and the commander of NATO-led KFOR peacekeepers in Kosovo a letter warning that any "change of Serbia's borders would bring a war."

Kosovo has been under UN administration since mid-1999 after NATO bombing helped to drive out Serbian forces under late president Slobodan Milosevic who were waging a brutal crackdown against ethnic Albanians.

affiliated to the Socialist Party of Serbia.