

Armed Group Threatens Reprisals Unless Kosovo Independence Declared

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PRISTINA, Serbia-Montenegro, Nov 2 (AFP) -

An armed group has threatened reprisals unless Kosovo's government declares independence from Serbia ahead of upcoming talks on the province's status, reports said Wednesday.

The Army for Kosovo Independence (UPK), a group that emerged in mid-October, issued the warning through local media to the five politicians that will represent the province's independence-seeking ethnic Albanian majority in the UN-sponsored talks.

"The UPK is monitoring closely the irresponsible work of the negotiating team. In order to move things forward we have engaged five units," said the statement which was signed by a "Commander Luigi".

"If the deputies (of Kosovo's parliament) don't act according to the mandate given to them by voters, they will have a very tough time in the coming days," the statement said.

"The UPK will be forced to execute the decision taken by its headquarters," it added, without specifying what action would be taken in the event that a declaration of independence is not adopted by Kosovo's parliament.

The United Nations hopes to start the delicate negotiations on the future status of Kosovo within weeks.

Ethnic Albanians, who make up more than 90 percent of the province's population, are demanding independence, while Belgrade wants to maintain sovereignty over the territory Serbs see as the cradle of their civilisation.

Neeraj Singh, the UN Mission (UNMIK) in Kosovo spokesman said UNMIK has seen several UPK statements and e-mail messages.

"The status of Kosovo will not be decided on the streets, or

... on the Internet. It will not be decided unilaterally by Pristina or Belgrade," Singh told reporters.

Singh said that a "clear process" has been laid down, decided on the "basis of status talks involving Pristina, Belgrade and the other stakeholders, the Contact Group, the European Union and, ultimately, the UN Security Council."

"That is the reality, the rest is myth," Singh said.

Pio Sabetta, spokesman of the NATO-led forces in Kosovo (KFOR) said the troops "take seriously every information we receive".

"But at the moment, these individual criminals are not going to endanger the global situation in Kosovo," Sabetta said.

KFOR officials said recently they were investigating the activities of armed groups, reportedly UPK members, that appear at night to set up illegal roadblocks in the province's west, a stronghold of hardcore nationalist Albanians.

Members of an armed group wearing camouflage fatigues and masks had even stopped a KFOR vehicle at a checkpoint in the region on one night, the Koha Ditore newspaper said at the time.

Kosovo has been run by the United Nations and NATO since a bombing campaign by the alliance ended a crackdown by Serbian forces against Albanian separatists in June 1999.

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