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Serbian security forces are positioning themselves in the region

The Yugoslav President, Vojislav Kostunica, has urged Nato and the United Nations to stop ethnic Albanian gunmen killing Serb police in a tense Kosovo-Serbia border zone.

Mr Kostunica, speaking in Vienna, said he had sent letters to Nato chief George Robertson and UN Secretary General Kofi Annan pressing for action on a matter which could "set the region ablaze".

Mr Kostunica said the situation was becoming increasingly tense, and the lightly-armed Serbian police could not cope with Albanian separatists infiltrating from UN-run Kosovo.

"It is crystal clear that K-FOR and UNMIK [the UN administration in Kosovo] have failed to do their part of the job properly," he told reporters after signing documents admitting Yugoslavia to the European security organisation, the OSCE.

Mr Kostunica said he was cutting short his visit to Vienna to go directly to south-eastern Serbia.

The Serbian Government had warned it would order troops back into a demilitarised zone along the border unless armed Albanian separatists stop their attacks against the police by 1700 (1800 GMT) on Monday.

But later, a senior Serbian official said Belgrade would extend the deadline.

“ Violence is taking the upper hand again... We now have the Albanian terrorists. They are terrorising both Serbs and Albanians

Vojislav Kostunica

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The BBC's Jackie Rowland in Belgrade says this has defused the mounting crisis at least for now.

Refugee workers in Kosovo say hundreds of Albanians have been fleeing south-eastern Serbia in the run up to the deadline.

Ethnic cleansing

Mr Kostunica said the rules governing the demilitarised border zone between south-eastern Serbia and Kosovo were flawed.

Under an agreement signed by Nato and Yugoslavia last year, Serbian police are only allowed to carry light arms in a five-kilometre wide buffer zone. No Serbian military units are permitted in the area.

Mr Kostunica told the OSCE that the Serbian minority in the region had been "ethnically cleansed" by Albanian rebels and only a small unit of police officers remained.

Police there say they have come under attack in recent days from Albanian separatists.

Four policemen were reported killed and several others injured in the attacks on Tuesday and Wednesday.

K-For has stepped up monitoring and boundary patrols after the attacks, which it blamed on the Albanian guerrillas.

The Nato-led forces also warned Belgrade not to send troops or special police into the border zone.

The region is said to be increasingly tense as both Serbs and local Albanians prepare for an escalation in the conflict.

Albanian separatists have

Timeline

21 Nov - Armed Albanians infiltrate southern Serbia, engage police

22 Nov - Attempt on life of Yugoslav representative in Pristina

22 Nov - Bodies of Serbian policemen found in southern Serbia

22 Nov - Ten Albanians detained by K-For, ammunition lorry seized

23 Nov - K-For troops close border checkpoint

23 Nov - Moderate Albanian Xhemajl

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advanced to within a few kilometres of the town of Bujanovac, and there are reports of heavy artillery around their base.

However, there has been no fighting for the past two days and rebel fighters are reported to have agreed on a ceasefire until Friday.

Major test

The crisis is providing the first major test for the new Yugoslav president, Vojislav Kostunica.

The international community is willing to give him breathing space during his first few months in power. But correspondents say the honeymoon will end if Serbian forces carry out attacks against civilians.

Mustafa shot dead in Pristina

24 Nov - K-For finds arms after mortar attack

24 Nov - Serbia gives K-For 72 hours to end attacks



Around 70,000 ethnic Albanians live in the Presevo valley, still administered by Belgrade. President Kostunica will visit the border region

Guerrillas involved in the current fighting are believed to come from the Liberation Army of Presevo, Medvedja and Bujanovac (UCPMB), an offshoot of the Kosovo Liberation Army.

They are seeking to secede from Belgrade and include the region in an independent Kosovo.

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