

Crisis in Kosovo

Main Kosovo border crossings closed

BELGRADE, Yugoslavia (AP) — Yugoslav authorities sealed off Kosovo's main border crossings Wednesday, preventing ethnic Albanians from leaving as the wave of refugees approached the half-million mark. As NATO stepped up its airstrikes, a Cypriot mediator sought freedom for three captured U.S. soldiers.

NATO planes and cruise missiles struck military targets in Kosovo and inflicted heavy damage elsewhere in Yugoslavia.

Albania's parliament approved NATO plans to send in 24 U.S. Apache attack helicopters — a move that should bolster the alliance's firepower against the Yugoslav tanks and armor that have driven ethnic Albanians from their homes in Kosovo.

After forcing more than 400,000 refugees out to neighboring countries, Yugoslav authorities closed the main exit route on Wednesday without explanation, forcing tens of thousands of people back toward the burned villages they had been escaping from.

German Defense Minister Rudolf Scharping warned that the Yugoslavs may be planning to use the civilians in Kosovo as "human shields" against NATO attack.

In Morini, the crossing point for Kosovo refugees into Albania, the flow of cars and tractors suddenly stopped at 3 a.m., witnesses said. Yugoslav border guards could be seen laying what appeared to be mines and digging fortifications just inside their territory.

"The refugees ... were told to return to their places of residence — whatever is left of those places," said Doran Vienneau of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, which has been monitoring the border.

Scharping said Yugoslav forces had begun forcing ethnic Albanians back from the border areas into the province. He showed aerial photos that he said showed Serb tanks surrounding a Kosovo village, separating the men and women, and then opening fire on houses.

The former president of Cyprus, Spyros Kyprianou, began a mission to win the release of three American soldiers seized along the Yugoslav border with Macedonia on March 31. Cyprus, which is not a NATO member, has historically had close ties with Yugoslavia.

Allies question Milosevic's motives

BELGRADE, Yugoslavia — The offering of a unilateral cease-fire and a possible willingness to release three captured U.S. soldiers could be an indicator that President Slobodan Milosevic is looking for a way out in his confrontation with NATO over Kosovo.

And there are signs the people of Serbia may welcome a compromise with the enemy after two weeks of air strikes.

"Clearly (Milosevic) miscalculated his options and realizes that this has been going on too long," Belgrade journalist Dusan Radulovic said.

In particular, the cease-fire, announced Tuesday, may be an attempt by the Yugoslav leader to head off any effort by the NATO allies to send in ground troops to bring an end to the conflict that has forced hundreds of thousands of ethnic Albanians out of Kosovo.

"Milosevic is fast approaching a point where getting some kind of negotiations are in his interest in order to halt the bombings and to forestall the decision to introduce ground forces," said Ivo Daalder, a former Clinton administration official now with the Brookings Institution in Washington.

"Milosevic can survive a prolonged aerial war and proclaim victory in the end, but he cannot survive the introduction of ground forces," he said.

But it's also possible that the cease-fire was an attempt by the Yugoslav leader to play to the home audience — making an offer he knew would be refused so he could continue to portray NATO as a

demonic force bent on destroying Serbia.

Anthony Cordesman, a professor of national security at Georgetown University in Washington, said Milosevic looked to be trying to "improve the very negative image of Serbs-as-aggressors in the West."

"Dealing humanely with the POWs is one way, as is opening up negotiations ... His best strategy is to hope that these moves will weaken NATO's resolve," he said.

But are Washington and the NATO allies ready to cut a deal?

If the cease-fire was an attempt to split the Western alliance, it apparently failed — even member nations less hawkish than the United States and Britain were reported determined Wednesday to continue the air attacks.

Even so, Daalder said, Milosevic is "a brilliant tactician and he's now testing with his various probes how little he has to do to get NATO to split. I believe you'll see other probes like this in coming days."

President Clinton dismissed Yugoslavia's cease-fire against ethnic Albanian guerrillas in Kosovo as a hollow promise and said Washington and its NATO allies are "determined to stay united and to persist until we prevail."

The heaviest night of airstrikes since the NATO assault began March 24 followed Milosevic's cease-fire offer Tuesday, making clear that NATO countries continue holding out for much more.

Kyprianou flew to Athens, where he said he was "waiting for the green light from Belgrade" before going to Yugoslavia today.

He said he believed the release of the soldiers was imminent.

Another nightmare was brewing for the tens of thousands of Kosovo refugees who had made it across into neighboring Macedonia only to be trapped for days in squalid conditions.

With frightening efficiency, Macedonian officials emptied the border city of Blace on Wednesday, hus-

ting thousands of refugees onto buses so quickly that some were separated from their families.

Macedonia, which has been criticized for conditions at the makeshift camp, said it shipped 10,000 refugees to Albania and moved 25,000 others to NATO tent camps further in-country.

At NATO headquarters, Air Commodore David Wilby said alliance aircraft struck before dawn Wednesday at dozens of military targets and what NATO called "fielded forces in and around Kosovo" with "surgical precision."

Missouri keeps weapons bill

JEFFERSON CITY, Mo. (AP) — Missouri's residents have decided to keep the state's outlaw-era ban on carrying concealed weapons, despite a \$3.7 million campaign by the National Rifle Association.

With 99 percent of votes counted early Wednesday, Proposition B, which would have lifted the ban, had failed 52 percent to 48 percent, or 674,378 votes to 625,689 votes. Opponents said voters weren't swayed by the gun lobby's pitch.

"Missourians have said they just do not want guns carried into football games and bars and schools," said Harry Wiggins, a state senator from Kansas City who opposed the measure.

The referendum Tuesday was the first time a state had put the question of concealed weapons before voters. Thirty-one other states allow citizens to carry concealed guns, but those measures were enacted by legislators.

Missouri banned concealed weapons in a crackdown on gunslinging in 1875, when notorious bandit Jesse James was still at-large. He was shot to death seven years later in St. Joseph by a member of his gang.

Under Proposition B, state residents would have needed a second permit to carry a concealed weapon.

Applicants would have had to undergo criminal and mental health background checks, take at least 12 hours of state-approved training and

have no violent offenses on their records for at least five years.

Supporters said allowing law-abiding people to pack guns would keep the criminals guessing.

Critics said Proposition B would simply put more guns on the streets, and lead to more firearm violence because of lax requirements on training, eligibility and a permit applicant's past history of violence.

Although the measure was approved in 91 mostly rural counties, it failed by wide margins in St. Louis and Kansas City.

Nearly three out of four voters in St. Louis and a similar percentage in the city's suburbs rejected the proposal.

Giuliani to teach police manners

NEW YORK (AP) — "Hello, ma'am. Drop the gun, please."

New York's finest are getting a manners lesson from Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, who wants the nearly 40,000 police officers to be a little more civil, professional and courteous.

"Police officers are going to be required to refer to people in a respectful way," Giuliani said Tuesday. "They will be required to refer to people as 'Yes, sir' and 'No, sir' and 'Yes, ma'am' and 'No, ma'am.'"

"And they will be required to explain the nature of their conduct when they make a mistake."

Lest they forget all of this in a city that prides itself on being brusque, officers will have wallet-size cards listing the common courtesies.

Teens will be referred to as young men and women, and police are urged to respect "each individual, his or her cultural identity, customs and beliefs." Officers should apologize for any inconvenience.

The initiative follows the indictment of four white police officers on second-degree murder charges in the Feb. 4 shooting death of Amadou Diallo, an unarmed black West African immigrant.

World and Nation DATES

Washington, D.C. Park service hunts for destructive beaver

The Associated Press — The hunt is on for a beaver that's toppling cherry trees near the Jefferson Memorial.

The National Park Service began preparing traps Wednesday to catch the sharp-toothed rodent who's chewed its way through nine trees in less than a week, spokesman Earle Kittleman said.

Officials bemoaned that it's chosen the middle of the capital's annual Cherry Blossom Festival for its destructive campaign.

Washington, D.C. Errors caused agency's overstated numbers

The Associated Press — The federally funded agency that provides free legal aid for poor Americans overstated the number of cases it handled in 1997 by tens of thousands, drawing the ire of lawmakers who rely on the figures to decide how much money to give the program.

Legal Services Corp., a target of Republican budget cuts, says it cleared up bookkeeping errors and expects to report 200,000 fewer cases to Congress for 1998 — a 10 percent drop from the previous year's figure.

Washington, D.C. Starr to testify on law on independent counsel

The Associated Press — Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr and the three-judge panel that appointed him will testify April 14 before a Senate committee considering whether Congress should renew the Watergate-inspired law that provided for his job.

The Senate Governmental Affairs Committee, chaired by Sen. Fred Thompson, R-Tenn., will hear from Starr and federal judges, the panel announced Wednesday.

In his own statement, Starr confirmed that he would testify and said he looked forward to it.

Texas Plant faced threat of non-nuclear explosion

AMARILLO (AP) — Three technicians at the Pantex nuclear weapons plant were reassigned because of a safety mistake that created a danger of a non-nuclear explosion.

There was no threat of a nuclear blast, a spokesman said Wednesday.

The technicians failed to detach a weapons component from a missile warhead before running an electrical test on the part March 29, according to government and contractor reports.

The technicians quickly realized the mistake after taking a test reading.

Spain New cases of torture added to Pinochet list

MADRID (AP) — A Spanish judge has added 11 new cases of torture to his extradition petition against former Chilean dictator Gen. Augusto Pinochet, reports said Wednesday.

This is the third time that Judge Baltasar Garzon has extended his extradition request since the Mar. 24 ruling by Britain's highest court that restricted the range of charges possible against Pinochet to those after the British adoption of an international convention on torture in September 1988.

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