

media release

Kosovo's First Month

Pristina/Belgrade/Brussels, 18 March 2008: The first month of independence has mostly gone well, but violence in Mitrovica yesterday shows that the opponents of independence can still threaten the new state and that there is a risk that Serbian-inspired partition will harden and Kosovo become a frozen conflict.

*Kosovo's First Month**, the latest policy briefing from the International Crisis Group, examines the independence that was declared on 17 February. It recommends that the Kosovo government, the European Union and NATO press more countries to recognise Kosovo's independence quickly and urgently adopt a common strategy, with the UN, for dealing with Belgrade's attempt to control the Serb parts of the new state.

The major population displacements and widespread violence that many feared in the wake of independence have not happened. Independence celebrations included positive words to the Serb minority expressed in Serbian by the prime minister and president and a pledge to implement the plan for conditional independence devised by the UN Secretary-General's special representative, Martti Ahtisaari. EU foreign ministers issued a supportive statement and agreed on deployment of a special representative and a rule-of-law mission.

"The government now needs to pass laws, set up functioning institutions and coordinate economic development and aid", says Alex Anderson, Crisis Group Kosovo Project Director. "The prime minister and cabinet have called on the Serbs to take up their full rights as citizens, but Kosovo and its international supporters lack a full strategy for getting their message across",

Belgrade, however, is pushing Kosovo Serbs to break all contacts with Kosovo institutions and is strengthening its own control in the north. It has instructed Kosovo Serbs to oppose the new EU missions and insists that the only international presences with which it will cooperate are the UN mission (UNMIK) and NATO. The end-goal is to regain international recognition of Kosovo as sovereign Serbian territory and then carry out an internal partition of that territory into Serb and Albanian entities.

The UN, NATO and the EU have been caught unprepared by Serb tactics and need to coordinate better. The UN and NATO should seek to effectively control the border, police stations, courts and jails, and cooperate in reshaping their northern presence to aid transition and gradually introduce the EU rule-of-law mission (EULEX), first at border and customs posts. The 17 March violence in Mitrovica, involving Serb attacks on UN and NATO forces as they removed protestors who had occupied a regional court, shows how difficult this will be unless part of a well-defined, comprehensive approach.

"Serbia and Russia need to receive some very clear messages that partition of Kosovo is unacceptable", says Sabine Freizer, Crisis Group's Europe Program Director. "And the UN Secretary-General needs to reaffirm that the UN and the EU are working towards the same goals, including a UN hand-over to EU structures".

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*Read the full Crisis Group briefing on our website: www.crisisgroup.org