

Kosovo riots

Only one month has passed since 17th of February when Kosovo unilaterally declared independence from Serbia, yet it has been marked by a major riot on its territory. The reason behind the violence was the move of UNMIK and KFOR into the UNMIK-run court house in the northern Kosovo city of Mitrovica, with the aim of securing the building and arresting those Kosovo Serbs who had occupied the court for four days in protest at the recent independence.

International police were attacked by Serb crowds who then attempted to release those arrested by UNMIK Police. Stones, grenades and Molotov cocktails were thrown, with KFOR troops called in to back up the UNMIK Police. Violence followed with many injured and hospitalized on both sides. One Ukrainian police officer succumbed to his injuries. Both sides blamed each other for inciting the violence.

The leader of the Serb National Council for Northern Kosovo Milan Ivanović stated that UNMIK and KFOR used excessive force, sparking the reaction in the streets. Meanwhile KFOR and UNMIK representatives have criticized the lack of condemnation from Belgrade and have accused Serbs of shooting at international peace-keepers. At present, NATO armored vehicles are patrolling the bridge over the river Ibar, which divides the town into Serbian and Albanian parts, with international forces continuing to patrol the streets.

Reports from the ground suggest calm is now restored although tensions remain high in Mitrovica. In a good sign, UNMIK have on Thursday March 27 managed to hold talks with Kosovo Serb leaders in the nearby town of Zvečan.

The unrest in Mitrovica occurred on the 4th anniversary of the worst violence in Kosovo since the end of the war in 1999. The riots of the 17th and 18th of March 2004 left 19 people dead and more than 9000 injured with 35 Serb orthodox churches destroyed.

More information about riots in Mitrovica you can be found at B92¹ or BBC².

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¹ http://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics-article.php?yyyy=2008&mm=03&dd=17&nav_id=48507

² <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/7303792.stm>