

# Ravaged Village Tells of a Nightmare of Death

By CHRIS HEDGES

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REKAZ, Serbia -- The hulking remains of burned houses, most with gaping holes in the walls from huge explosions, stood empty and silent this afternoon.

Cows ambled across ruts left by armored personnel carriers, their hoofs dropping on piles of shell casings from machine guns. Police officers carrying assault rifles and wearing bulletproof vests scanned the countryside from the ridge lines and lay behind earthworks.

In the growing conflict between ethnic Albanian separatists and the Serbian authorities here in Kosovo Province, Serbian police and paramilitary units surrounded Prekaz on Thursday and began a fierce round of fighting that lasted until Saturday.

When the last pockets of resistance were subdued or driven out of the town, a stronghold of the outlawed Kosovo Liberation Army, at least 26 ethnic Albanians and 2 police officers were dead.

But there are indications that the death toll may be much higher.

Those who fled the village said the hundreds of police who had carried out the assault had fired indiscriminately, especially at men, many of whom apparently had been armed.

"We understand that about 30 percent of the village fled in the first hours of the fighting," said Adem Meta, an ethnic Albanian leader in the neighboring town of Skenderaj. "Prekaz is empty now. We have no idea what has happened to the rest of the villagers." In the hills around the town, women and children, along with small bands of armed men, continue to evade the police.

"We gave everyone in the town a chance to leave," said a police major, who refused to be identified. "Those who surrendered were allowed to get out. The rest of the town decided to stay and fight."

There were clear indications that the town saw heavy combat, despite assertions by

many ethnic Albanian leaders that the people were unarmed. There were scores of shell casings on the floors of houses, where broken terra cotta roof tiles and charred timbers lay in piles. And it was clear from the demolition of homes, many of which were surrounded by high concrete-block walls, that the Serbs had used heavy firepower to quell the resistance.

"We had no idea the terrorists had this kind of weaponry," said a police commando, who spoke on the condition that he not be identified. "They opened up on us with machine guns. They were lobbing mortars at us. No one expected them to have mortars. These can only have come from Albania."

The town was an example of how brazen the rebels have become in remote parts of the province, which saw its autonomous status revoked in 1989 by the Serbian leader Slobodan Milosevic, who is now President of Yugoslavia. Rebels paraded through the streets armed and in uniform in the middle of the day.

Those who fled the town said they did so amid heavy gunfire. They told harrowing tales of sleeping in forests, begging for water at houses they passed and huddling with frightened children in the undergrowth as police units fired on them.

Marie Kodra, 38, said she fled Prekez with her five children during the initial hours of fighting at dawn on Thursday. "The Serbs began to fire mortars on our houses," she said. "I grabbed my children and left Prekaz. We could not go into the streets -- there were too many police -- so we went into the hills."

Mrs. Kodra, whose husband was killed in the battle, ran up to a police patrol and waved a white scarf.

"I shouted, 'I am a woman with children!' " she said. "I heard the officer yell: 'Shoot! Kill them!' I pushed my children to the ground and an explosion went off near where we were lying."

The family moved through the night until they reached an empty basement, where they lay in dawn. Mrs. Kodra said many families in houses they passed had been too frightened to leave, fearing police retaliation.

"It was not until I got out of the area where there was fighting that I learned that my husband was dead," she said, soon afterward collapsing into the arms of friends.