

YUGOSLAVIA:

Kosovo Trial Provokes New Tensions

*The trial of Kosovar leaders accused of fomenting unrest in the Serbian province last March is aggravating tensions between Serbia and the northern republics and probably will lead to more international criticism of Yugoslavia's human rights record.* [REDACTED]

Lawyers for former Kosovo party chief Vlasi and 14 codefendants have delayed the proceedings by calling last Monday for a new judge and prosecutor and a change of venue from Serbian-controlled regions. Political leaders and human rights groups in the liberal northern republics of Slovenia and Croatia have called the process a political trial and demanded the charges be dropped, an option rejected so far by state and party bodies. A senior official close to Serbian strongman Milosevic has hinted at a posttrial pardon. [REDACTED]

The trial has sparked small protests and some violence in the provincial capital and several nearby towns. At least one protester died in a confrontation with police, and two were killed in a gun battle with the militia on Thursday. Unconfirmed reports suggest that the death toll on Thursday may have been higher and that another protester was killed the next day. Although local security was reinforced before the trial, there is no sign of a return to the de facto martial law imposed following riots last spring. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] The trial is quickly becoming a no-win situation for Serbia, and it is sure to increase the points of contention between already feuding republics. A swift conviction and stiff sentence would play well to Milosevic's hardline constituents, but it would remind other regions of Serbia's heavyhandedness last spring and Milosevic's ambition to dominate national politics. On the other hand, a change in venue, although not likely, would lay the groundwork for an acquittal, handing Serbia a major defeat in the runup to the party congress in January. Federal leaders probably will press the judiciary to let foreign diplomats attend what is sure to be a long trial. Heightened international concern over the lack of openness, the legitimacy of the charges, and police handling of the protests are likely to further tarnish Belgrade's human rights record. [REDACTED]

Ethnic Albanian protesters have adopted new tactics. The well-orchestrated and orderly demonstrations last spring have given way to sporadic hit-and-run confrontations by small groups armed with stones and guns, recalling "West Bank" tactics. Last week's violence is likely to convince security officials of the potential for continued unrest in the province and delay plans to withdraw troops and reduce security measures. [REDACTED]