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Russia Tells West to Stop 'Propaganda' Over Kosovo Clashes

By AFP

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Soldiers of NATO-led international peacekeeping Kosovo Force (KFOR) clash with ethnic Serbs in Zvecan, Kosovo. **Georgi Licovcki / EPA / TASS**

Russia on Tuesday told the West to stop its "deceitful propaganda" after more than 30 peacekeepers deployed in a NATO-led mission in Kosovo were injured in clashes with ethnic Serbs.

Kosovo declared its independence from Serbia in 2008, but Belgrade and Moscow have refused to recognize it.

Russia, Serbia's traditional ally, also effectively barred Kosovo from having a seat at the United Nations.

"We call on the West to finally halt its deceitful propaganda and stop blaming the incidents in Kosovo on desperate Serbs, who are trying to defend their legitimate rights and freedom

peacefully and without weapons," the Foreign Ministry said.

Kosovo is mainly populated by ethnic Albanians, but Serbs there have remained largely loyal to Belgrade, especially in the north where they are a majority.

Last month, ethnic Albanian mayors were elected in several northern towns, triggering protest from ethnic Serbs who demand their removal.

"It is not too late to reverse the story of these fake municipal elections of April 23, if Westerners really care about peace and stability," Russia said.

Serbs mainly boycotted last month's election in northern provinces, allowing ethnic Albanians to take control of local councils despite a low turnout.

Russia said the "number one task it the creation of the Community of Serb Municipalities," a controversial project meant to ensure a level of self-management in the province.

"We need decisive steps to de-escalate, and not half-measures like the proposal from the U.S.," it said.

It also blasted the NATO-led Kosovo Force (KFOR) for "becoming a source of unnecessary violence, an escalating factor."

KFOR at first tried to separate protesters from the police, but later started to disperse the crowd using shields and batons.

A total of 30 peacekeepers were wounded in the clashes including "fractures and burns from improvised explosive incendiary devices," KFOR said.

Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic said 52 demonstrators were hurt, three of them "seriously."

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