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Albanian scam victims riot, turn on government

January 25, 1997
Web posted at: 9:55 p.m. EST (1455 GMT)

LUSHNJE, Albania (CNN) -- Violence in Albania escalated sharply Saturday when an angry mob beat up riot police and a senior government official appealing for order.  (910K/23 sec. [QuickTime movie](#))

A fraudulent investment scheme, in which critics claim the government colluded, has taken the savings of large numbers of Albanians, enraging the masses and causing widespread rioting against the government.

President Sali Berisha Saturday night appeared on state television and made a special plea for calm.

He said depositors would get their money back, but appealed for time. "It is not possible to give money to 300,000 people in one day," he said.

Rioters not soothed

Leaders of the riot were not soothed. They overwhelmed police in the provincial town of Lushnje, burning municipal buildings and smashing windows at random. There was little the government could do to stop them.

Trying to calm the crowd, Tritan Shehu, Albania's deputy prime minister and foreign minister, arrived Saturday via helicopter and confronted stone-throwing protesters who shouted "Down with the government!"

and "We want our money!"

A rock struck him in the head, and he was attacked by a man wielding an iron bar, leaving him in obvious pain. He fled to the locker room of the town soccer stadium with his bodyguards and plain-clothes policemen and eventually escaped.

Life savings wiped out

Many people in this isolated and formerly communist country -- the poorest in Europe -- sank their life savings into get-rich-quick schemes. Some of the funds stopped paying on schedule about a week ago, setting off riots across the country.

Police detained 118 people associated with the funds, including two fund operators. Police also used batons to quell rioters in Tirana, the capital.

But unrest continued in at least five other communities across the nation of 3.2 million people, state television reported.

In Lushnje, mobs turned the tables on police. At one point a group of police were ferried into the stadium where the deputy prime minister was trapped.

A crowd immediately set upon them and seized their weapons. The police pleaded that they had been forced to come, but to no avail. The mob beat them anyway.

[Reuters](#) contributed to this report.

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