Thousands of former soldiers show up to enlist in new army

MOGADISHU, Somalia (AP) – They came by the thousands to the main soccer stadium in this city Saturday, some in their old uniforms complete with medals and service stripes, many shedding tears of joy on seeing former comrades.

An estimated 11,000 former Somali soldiers who served during the 21-year rule of Mohamed Siad Barre came to re-enlist in the new army being formed by Somalia's first government in a decade.

The gathering was short-lived because the former soldiers were told to return home and fetch documents to prove what rank they held in the old army. But the man who issued the enlistment call six days ago, Defense Minister Abdullahi Boqor Muse, called the meeting historic nonetheless: The creation of an army is considered key to reuniting this fractured country.

"You are now making the difference," Muse told the men. "You are the government. You understand weapons and the consequence of their misuse."

Most of the soldiers belonged to the old army that fell apart when a coalition of rebels forced Siad Barre to flee to neighboring Kenya in January 1991.

Since his ouster, Somalia has had no functioning central government. The rebel coalition soon broke up, and the country of 7 million in the Horn of Africa remains divided into fiefdoms defended by clan-based militias.

In August, a national reconciliation conference in neighboring Djibouti elected President Abdiqasim Salad Hassan and a 245-member national assembly to rule the country. They now face the daunting task of establishing order by disarming thousands of militiamen, some loyal to faction leaders and others no more than bandits.

The northern regions of Somaliland and Puntland, in what was British Somaliland until 1960, refuse to recognize the authority of the new government. Several clan-based factions in Mogadishu and in central Somalia also oppose Hassan's administration.

Top officials in the new government attended Saturday's gathering.

Muse said Hassan's government recognizes the importance of the former soldiers. He told the would-be soldiers that it has "concluded that your reintegration is the restoration of Somalia's nationhood."

Muse said 13 previous attempts had been made to reconcile Somalis, but what he described as a few "warmongers and power-hungry individuals" have made reconciliation impossible.

"Somalia's enemy wants to divide the country into five powerless emirates, but we are calling our army for the security of our people," he said, a reference to the recent call by faction leaders to split the country into five autonomous regions.

"We are not provoking anybody," Muse said. "We know what war is. The army is the backbone of the government, and our morale is high now."

The re-enlistment of the former soldiers is key to reuniting Somalis, said Col. Hasshi Hassan Warsame.

"This is the only and easiest way we could reunite and retain our prestige among our people," he said.

But not all former soldiers want to join the army again.

At his business in a market in downtown Mogadishu, Hashi Sabriyeh Isaak said: "I have developed a new profession."

"I am now an electrician. And I can never forget how I was punished when I disobeyed my superiors," he said.

Residents in southern Mexico attack police

LOS CHORROS, Mexico (AP) – Villagers in the restive Chiapas state clashed with 200 police who were preparing to arrest alleged members of a paramilitary group sought in a massacre.

Witnesses said residents of Los Chorros attacked the police with rocks and sticks after they entered the small Chiapas village. The officers fled and there were no arrests.

A news release from the federal attorney general's office said residents also shot at police as they fled. Two officers and three Indian residents suffered minor injuries in the melee, authorities said.

The police, agents of an anti-paramilitary unit of the attorney general's office, marched into town before dawn in an effort to capture 21 paramilitary members wanted in the 1997 massacre of 45 Indians in nearby Acteal.

"Our community felt attacked and offended," said a woman in Los Chorros who would not give her name. "Here in this community there are no paramilitaries."

Despite a cease-fire that followed a 1994 rebellion in Chiapas by leftist Zapatista rebels, who demanded more rights for the region's impoverished Indians, scores of people have been killed in clashes between rebels and armed pro-government paramilitary squads.

Forty-five indigenous members of a pro-government paramilitary group are serving 35 years in prison for the massacre.

Spain stages military draft for last time

MADRID, Spain (AP) – The government held its much-loathed military draft lottery for the last time Wednesday, as Spain moves fitfully toward an all-professional armed forces.

Marking the end of a 150-year-old tradition, the Defense Ministry selected 90,625 men age 18 or older to serve nine-month stints in the army, air force or navy. Men whose numbers come up but who don't want to serve can chose to do community service.

The men will start to serve early next year, and by the end of 2001 the Spanish armed forces will be free of forced recruits.

The government of Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar pushed a bill through Parliament in 1996 calling for an all-professional military in 2002. Other major European countries also have such forces, including Britain, France and the Netherlands.

However, Spain is having a hard time filling the military's ranks. In its recruitment drive last month, only 8,000 candidates applied for 9,100 posts. In February, the Defense Ministry lowered the IQ requirement for joining the military from 90 to 70. Psychologists say an IQ of 100 is average for young adults, while 70 is the minimum for normal behavior.

The military currently has 75,000 professional members, and the government is struggling to boost that to about 100,000.

Soldiers' pay is about 100,000 pesetas (dlrs 500) a month. "That's not bad," Defense Minister Federico Trillo has said. It's about what a construction worker makes.

As Spaniards bid farewell to the draft, the newspaper El Mundo said good riddance.

"There will be those who miss the draft as an unforgettable period of learning, but most people will breathe a sigh of relief over the end of this anachronism."

Youth movements protest authoritarian Government

MINSK, Belarus (AP) – Youth groups staged demonstrations across Belarus on Sunday against President Alexander Lukashenko's authoritarian government and riot police arrested dozens of protesters in the capital.

The Belarusian Youth Front, an opposition group, said that its supporters staged 26 demonstrations in towns across the former Soviet republic.

Riot police with shields blocked the march in the capital Minsk and dispersed the protesters, many of them wearing masks. An Associated Press reporter saw about two dozen protesters being arrested by police.

Ales Belyatsky, chief of the private human rights group Spring, claimed that about 100 protesters had been arrested and some were beaten. An Interior Ministry spokesman refused to comment on the claim and declined to say how many people were arrested.

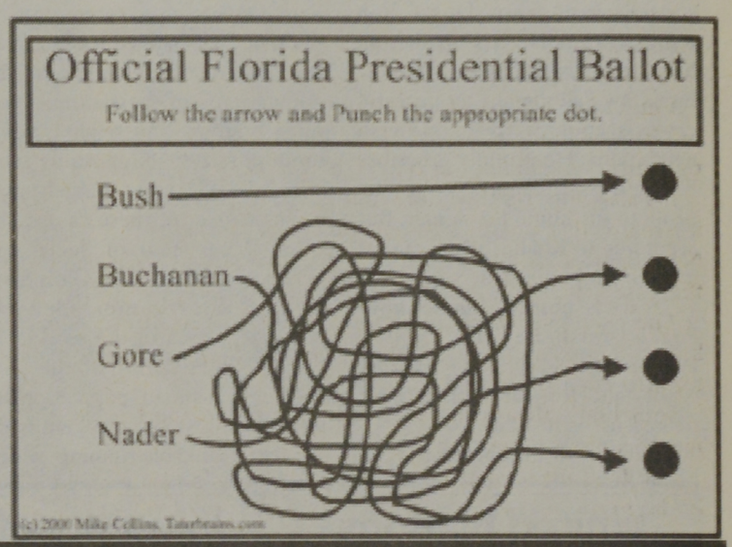
Youth movements had been given permission to hold a rally on Minsk's outskirts, but the protesters gathered downtown instead to march on main government buildings.

Groups in 25 other Belarusian towns also staged protests Sunday against Lukashenko's government but it was not known if police broke up any of those demonstrations.

Several people were reportedly arrested at those rallies.

"Today's action showed how the government really treats young people," said Alena Valynets, the coordinator of the Belarusian Youth Front. "The government not only doesn't want change, it's prepared to push us back to the worst period of the Soviet Union."

Lukashenko, Belarusian president since 1994, has cracked down on opposition and arrested and jailed many opponents. Several dissidents have also disappeared without explanation in recent years.



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