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Date Posted: 19-Mar-2004

JANE'S DEFENCE WEEKLY - MARCH 24, 2004

UK spearheads NATO reinforcements to Balkans

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More than 750 soldiers from the UK's Spearhead Land Element (SLE) were ordered to the disputed province of Kosovo on 18 March in response to an outbreak of inter-ethnic violence.

The troops from the 1st Battalion The Royal Gloucestershire, Berkshire and Wiltshire Regiment make up the UK's contribution to NATO's Over the Horizon Forces (OTHF), established to provide a rapid reinforcement support to NATO's Kosovo Force (KFOR) and Stabilisation Force (SFOR) in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Germany is sending 600 reinforcements and France is also sending several hundred additional troops to Kosovo.

A company of some 150 US troops and around 200 Italians from SFOR in Bosnia deployed on 18 March by air to Kosovo after Supreme Allied Commander Europe Gen James Jones signed the activation order for the OTHF.

The creation of the OTHF was central to NATO plans to reduce its forces in the Balkans. It aimed to give NATO commanders in the region the ability to deter outbreaks of ethnic violence without having to maintain large numbers of troops on the ground there. NATO plans include reducing the size of SFOR from 11,600 to 7,000 in June before the possible transfer of responsibility for the mission to the EU. The size of KFOR is due to be reduced from 29,000 in 2003 to some 15,000 later this year.

NATO has regularly tested its OTHF concept in both Kosovo and Bosnia-Herzegovina in its 'Dynamic Response' series of exercises.



*Norwegian KFOR peacekeepers block a road leading to a suburb of Kosovo capital Pristina on 19 March. The UK deployed an emergency contingent to the region on 18 March
(Source: PA)*

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