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U.S. sends attack arms to Albania

By Laura Myers
 The Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The United States agreed to send 24 Apache attack helicopters, 18 multiple rocket launchers and 2,600 troops to Albania so NATO can closely strike Serb troops and tanks in Kosovo and "tighten the noose around" Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic's forces.

Although U.S. troops will be put at greater risk in escalating the nearly 2-week-old NATO airstrikes across Yugoslavia, Pentagon officials said the Apaches could help halt the Serbs' ethnic cleansing campaign. It already has cleared the province of more than 350,000 ethnic Albanians and could halve the estimated 1.9 million Kosovo population that once was only 10 percent Serb.

"This will basically help NATO tighten the noose around Milosevic's neck," Pentagon spokesman Kenneth Bacon said Sunday. "This will help NATO do more to kill armored forces quickly than we've been able to do so far."

Defense Secretary William Cohen said today, "We're going after his tanks, his armored units, his artillery, those forces on the ground that are carrying out this horrific ethnic cleansing. They are going to be targeted now and taken out."

Cohen, in an interview with The Associated Press, said the United States will accept 20,000 refugees on a temporary basis. "We'll have to decide whether they go to Guantanamo [Cuba, site of a U.S. Navy base] or possibly Guam. That hasn't been decided just yet."

Pentagon officials said today the Army expects to send about 2,600 soldiers with the Apaches and aviation support forces from several headquarters in Germany. In addition to the 24 Apache helicopters offered to NATO, the Army also expects to send 26 support helicopters, including medevac versions of the UH-60 Blackhawk and some CH-47 Chinook cargo helicopters.

The forces deploying from Germany also might include M1 Abrams tanks from the 1st Ar-

mored Division, officials said.

President Clinton, welcoming hundreds of children and their parents to the annual White House Easter egg roll, asked the crowd to "send our thoughts and prayers to our men and women in uniform in Kosovo, and our prayers and best wishes to the many thousands of refugees that have been generated by that terrible conflict."

Although NATO airstrikes with cruise missiles and bombs have been unrelenting since they began March 24, bad weather has prevented many allied pilots from reaching targets, which have moved closer and closer to Milosevic's power, hitting downtown Belgrade throughout the weekend.

The 18 multiple launch rocket systems will protect the all-weather Apaches with short- and medium-range missiles, some armed with scores of "bomblets," to take out Yugoslav air defenses throughout Kosovo, Bacon told reporters. Fourteen Bradley Fighting Vehicles, military police and intelligence personnel will be among the U.S. troops sent to Albania.

"Obviously, close-in engagement is, by definition, riskier than more distant engagement. But the Army is trained to cope with that," Bacon said of the inherent danger.

NATO leaders meeting today in Brussels, Belgium, must approve using the weapons, which were requested a week ago by Army Gen. Wesley Clark, NATO's supreme allied commander. President Clinton would then need to approve the Apache gunship plan a second time, although Cohen has signed the deployment order, the Pentagon said.

It could take a week to 10 days to deploy the Apaches from Illesheim, Germany, because many U.S. military cargo planes also are being used for humanitarian aid, military officials said.

U.S. and NATO officials have expressed surprise at how swiftly Milosevic's army, paramilitary and police forces have been able to sweep ethnic Albanians from Kosovo since NATO airstrikes began, creating a refugee exodus

that has created a humanitarian crisis in the Balkans.

In response, the United States said Sunday it will provide temporary shelter for up to 20,000 ethnic Albanians fleeing Serb assaults while European nations take in as many as 100,000 — but just until they can return home under NATO-led international protection.

"These people have to go back; otherwise, there are no people in Kosovo," Secretary of State Madeleine Albright said on NBC's "Meet the Press."

Meanwhile, The Washington Post reported today that the nation's top military commanders expressed deep reservations about the U.S. course in the weeks before the air campaign began.

In closed-door sessions, the Joint Chiefs of Staff argued for more economic sanctions, questioned whether U.S. interests were sufficiently at stake and challenged Albright's view that Serb actions could lead to wider destabilization in the Balkans and Europe, the newspaper said. It quoted unidentified sources familiar with the chiefs' thinking.

Cohen, in the AP interview, said, "Those stories are not correct. ... The chiefs presented their views, but they also ultimately decided — and unanimously — that they needed to support this air campaign, even with its limitations, because of the issue of NATO's credibility being on the line."

Calling for Clinton to keep his options open, Sen. Dick Lugar, R-Ind., a senior member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, said, "The diplomacy won't start until our president stops saying no ground troops."

But White House national security adviser Sandy Berger said the administration would "stay the course" in the air-oriented campaign.

"Fighting village to village, there would be thousands of casualties," Berger said on CBS' "Face the Nation." "We do not believe it is necessary to achieve our objectives."

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