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Europe cuts off talks with Serbia after mob sets US embassy ablaze



A rioter throws a street sign into the burning US Embassy in Belgrade last night

David Byers, and agencies in Belgrade

European governments today cut off talks with Serbia over a potentially lucrative economic deal after rampaging mobs attacked western embassies in a night of riotous violence in Belgrade.

Javier Solana, the European Union's (EU) foreign policy chief, announced that talks designed to reach a co-operation agreement with Serbia would be put on hold until things "calm down" in the country.

The talks were considered crucial for Serbia as they were designed to prepare it for eventual EU membership, and could have been economically lucrative as they would have led to an agreement to open up trade and political ties.

Today, America lodged a formal complaint with the Serbian Prime Minister after riots in which thousands of "thugs", who had attended a state-sponsored demonstration, forced their way into the American embassy in Belgrade and set it on fire.

Following violence which also included vandalism at the British, German, Turkish and Croatian embassies, an unidentified charred body was last night found inside the American Embassy after it was set ablaze.

The attacks, which were led by Serbs angry at western support for Kosovan independence, left around 100 people injured.

Although they came after a state-sponsored anti-Kosovan rally, which 200,000 people attended, the Serbian President today desperately tried to dampen down the protests amid international condemnation, calling for calm.

"To all those who are participating in the unrest, I want to ask them to pull back. It only harms the defence of our integrity and sovereignty and the defence of our Kosovo," Boris Tadic was quoted as saying late last night, speaking to the Beta news agency.

Mr Solana, however, announced that, such were the tensions after last night's violence, talks with Serbia would be put on hold on building an agreement between the 27-nation bloc and the Balkan nation.

"We are not at this very moment trying to move that on," he told journalists. "Things will have to calm down before we can we can recuperate the climate that will allow for any contact to move.

"Embassies have to be protected and that is (Serbia's) obligation. These acts won't lead anywhere," he said.

America was furious today that police had failed to protect the country's embassy and stop a break-in. The fact that demonstrators were able to get into the grounds of an American embassy, which are heavily fortified worldwide, is almost unheard of.

"We have made known to the Serbian government our concern and displeasure that their police force did not prevent this incident," Dana Perino, a spokeswoman for President Bush said, adding that the embassy had been "attacked by thugs".

The US State Department said it had lodged a complaint, with Nicholas Burns, the US undersecretary of state, telephoning Prime Minister Vojislav Kostunica and Vuk Jeremic, the Foreign Minister, to formally protest.

"The message was very clear: that the situation was intolerable," Sean McCormack, a state department spokesman, said.

Adding that he was concerned about the lack of security around the embassy, Mr McCormack added: "They (police) needed to act immediately to provide the adequate security forces so that our embassy compound and our personnel were not under attack."

Last night's violence began when rioters, emerging from the rally, broke into the US mission, setting fire to offices and police guardhouses on the pavement in front of the building.

The nearby Croatian embassy was also attacked, and a building next-door was damaged by flames. After breaking up the protests, riot police fought running battles with protesters who looted dozens of shops in central Belgrade.

Today, the UN Security Council issued a statement in which it said it condemned "in the strongest terms the mob attacks".

This morning, the streets had mostly been cleared of debris as the morning rush-hour traffic began. The US, and other Western embassies, were seen to be heavily guarded.