

Protesters in Belgrade attack U.S. embassy
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BELGRADE: Demonstrators attacked the United States Embassy and set part of it ablaze on Thursday as tens of thousands of angry Serbs took to the streets of Belgrade to protest Kosovo's declaration of independence.

The United States has been a strong advocate of Kosovo's independence from Serbia and was among the first countries to recognize the new state, stoking deep resentment. Rian Harris, an embassy spokeswoman, said that a body had been found inside the building, but that all embassy staff members were accounted for.

Witnesses said that at least 100 people broke into the embassy, which was closed, and burned some of its rooms. One protester ripped the American flag from the facade of the building. An estimated 1,000 demonstrators cheered as the vandals, some wearing masks, jumped onto the building's balcony waving a Serbian flag and chanting "Serbia, Serbia!" the witnesses said. A police convoy firing tear gas dispersed the crowd.

The Associated Press reported that the small fires at the embassy were quickly extinguished.

Serbian television reported that the Croatian Embassy had also been attacked, and the state news agency said that the Bosnian and Turkish Embassies were also targets. The police said at least 140 people had been injured in the incidents, 32 of them police officers. Security sources estimated that 150,000 people joined the protests.

Groups also broke into a McDonald's in central Belgrade and destroyed its interior. Witnesses said vandals were attacking foreign-owned shops, including a Nike store, and were seen carrying off shoes and other goods as the Serbian police looked on.

The United States Embassy had been closed since Sunday after it was stoned.

R. Nicholas Burns, the under secretary of state for political affairs, telephoned Serbian officials to formally complain about the breaching of the embassy, said a State Department spokesman, Sean McCormack. McCormack told reporters on Thursday that "we would hold the Serbian government personally responsible for the safety and well-being of our embassy employees."

He added that the security that had been provided was completely inadequate.

The United Nations Security Council issued a unanimous statement of the 15 members saying they "condemn in the strongest terms the mob attacks against embassies in Belgrade which have resulted in damage to embassy premises and have endangered diplomatic personnel." The action was taken at the urging of Zalmay Khalilzad, the American ambassador.

The violence fueled fears in Washington and Brussels that Serbia was turning to the virulent nationalism of the past. But Serbian analysts predicted the country would ultimately embrace the West as it came to terms with losing its medieval heartland.

In recent days, Western leaders have watched with growing alarm as Serbia's hard-line prime minister, Vojislav Kostunica, who helped lead the revolution that overthrew Slobodan Milosevic in 2000, has replicated the nationalist talk of the late dictator, who used Serbs' outrage that their ancestral heartland was dominated by Muslim Albanians to come to power in Serbia.

"As long as we live, Kosovo is Serbia," Kostunica told the crowd in Belgrade. "We're not alone in our fight. President Putin is with us," he said of President Vladimir Putin of Russia.

In a sign of the divisions within Serbia's government, the pro-Western president, Boris Tadic, was absent from the rally, on a state visit to Romania.

Western diplomats said their hope for a moderate Serbia had been buttressed by the recent re-election of Tadic, who campaigned on the argument that holding on to Kosovo did not justify sacrificing Serbia's future in Europe. Their optimism, however, was tempered by the strong election showing for Tadic's opponent, Tomislav Nikolic, a far-right nationalist who has exploited Serbs' discontent over Kosovo by arguing that Serbia should reject Europe and look to Moscow and China instead.

But while Moscow has gained in popularity in Serbia by blocking Kosovo's integration into the international community, leading Serbian intellectuals said most Serbs realized that the Kremlin's willingness to fight for their cause was limited. "Russia wasn't there to help Serbs during the disintegration of the former Yugoslavia, it wasn't there to help Serbs in 1999 during the NATO bombing, and most people realize it will not go that far now," said Zoran Dogramadziev, a leading Serbian writer.

In the short term, analysts said an anti-European Union backlash would gain force after the West's support for an independent Kosovo. But Marko Blagojevic, an analyst with the Center for Democracy and Free Elections in Belgrade and a pollster, stressed that recent polls showed that 65 percent of Serbs saw their future in the European Union.

Blagojevic said he did not believe this had drastically changed. He noted that only about 10 percent of Serbs supported going to war over Kosovo.

Serbian analysts said that rather than reflecting a resurgence of dangerous nationalism, the protests over Kosovo reflected disenchantment by the "losers of the transition" — those Serbs who have not benefited from the country's democratic transformation during the eight years since Milosevic fell.

Unemployment hovers at about 21 percent, while the country's annual per capita gross domestic product of about \$7,400 has made Serbia one of Europe's poorest countries.

Without European Union membership, Serbs do not enjoy the open borders of their neighbors. Many Serbs say they feel isolated and closed in. Yet many of the younger generation say they would happily trade poor, landlocked Kosovo for better jobs and economic security.

"For my generation, the opportunity to have a good life is far more important than this piece of land," said Aleksandar Obradovic, a 23-year-old political scientist from Belgrade who did not protest on Thursday and, like many Serbs, has never been to Kosovo.

Ljubica Gojic, a leading Serbian commentator, noted that Milosevic had been overthrown by the Serbian people, who had recently put their faith in a newly elected moderate president, backed by the West. "If Tadic is good enough for the EU and Washington, why is he not acceptable to the Albanians in Kosovo?" she asked. "Milosevic is dead."