

MACEDONIA 'CLOSE TO PEACE DEAL'

Skopje, July 16, 2001

Macedonia yesterday appeared close to a peace deal after months of ethnic conflict. "We are making significant progress, pretty fast," said Menduh THACI, one of the ethnic Albanian told reporters.



Western negotiators have proposed a package of constitutional and legal reforms that would give the Albanians - about a third of the population - the increased rights they have demanded.

But the EU's negotiator, Francois LÉOTARD, US envoy James PARDEW, and Macedonian representatives have all declined to comment following marathon talks on 15/10.

The peace deal would make Albanian an official language and provide for state-funded higher education in Albanian. It would also introduce quotas for proportional representation in the army, courts, and other bodies and grant an element of self-rule in local government.

If the deal is finalised, NATO troops would be deployed to oversee disarmament of the 4,000 - 6,000 rebels. They have not been represented at the talks, but are expected to honour any agreement reached by ethnic Albanian political leaders.