KOSOVO PRESIDENT EXPECTS "HISTORIC" DEAL WITH SERBIA THIS YEAR

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Kosovo expects to resolve outstanding issues with Serbia this year by reaching an "historic" agreement that would pave the way for the Balkan country to get a seat at the United Nations, President Hashim Thaci said on Tuesday.

Kosovo seceded a decade ago from Serbia, but its independence has not been recognized by Belgrade, which together with its traditional allies Moscow and Beijing has blocked Pristina's bid for a U.N. seat.

As Belgrade moves closer to membership in the European Union, Serbian authorities are under pressure to resolve relations with neighbors including Kosovo.

"The deal between Kosovo and Serbia, which I believe will happen in 2018, will be a historic, a comprehensive agreement which will result in Kosovo's membership in United Nations," Thaci told Reuters in an interview.

Serbia lost control over Kosovo in 1999 when NATO waged a bombing campaign to halt killings of ethnic Albanians in a two-year counter-insurgency war. Nearly a decade later, in 2008, Kosovo declared independence, backed by the United States and most of the Western European states.

Kosovo's independence has been recognized by 115 states so far.

Thaci said the agreement with Serbia would bring full normalization of relations between the former foes, although they may not be required to recognize each other as independent states.

Kosovo's relations with Western countries was soured by an initiative to scrap a law that established a war crimes court.

The initiative was shelved under pressure by Western embassies in Pristina, and the court was set up in 2015, although it has yet to hear a case.

The Specialist Chamber, which has the authority to try ex-Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) guerrillas for alleged atrocities in the war that led to independence from Serbia, is part of Kosovo's legal system but based in The Hague to minimize the risks of witness intimidation and judicial corruption.

Kosovo's media have reported that some of the leading Kosovo politicians, including Thaci, who

was commander of the KLA, could be indicted by the court or called to testify.

"This was an historic injustice but for the sake of keeping the strategic partnership with the US, EU and NATO we created that [the court]," Thaci said. "Kosovo has nothing to hide."

Asked what he would do if called to testify as a witness or defendant by the court, he said: "The president or any other citizen of this country has no reason to be afraid."

"We never violated Kosovo law or international laws. We have fought against a dictator, against a man who committed genocide," he said, referring to former Yugoslav and Serbian president Slobodan Milosevic, who died in 2006 while on trial for war crimes.

The 1.8 million-strong country is preparing for a big celebration on Saturday to commemorate the 10th anniversary of its declaration of independence. Kosovo-born British singer Rita Ora is due to hold a big concert in Pristina.

https://www.voanews.com/a/kosovo-president-expects-historic-deal-serbia-this-year/4252211.html

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