

Gunmen charge tolls as thousands flee chaotic Albania by sea

TIRANA, Albania (AP) — Gunmen ruled much of southern Albania on Monday, demanding hefty fees from those wanting to flee the country and robbing a bank as police watched helplessly. Hundreds of Albanians clogged the ports, trying to join nearly 7,000

others who already have reached Italy. Many of the boats heading across the choppy waters of the Adriatic were dangerously overcrowded. In the most dramatic sea rescue, the Italian coast guard pulled 900 panicked Albanians

from a leaky gunboat sinking off Brindisi, Italy. In another, a U.S. helicopter lit the darkness as U.S. Marines and Navy seamen dove into the black waters to save 55 Albanians whose boat had capsized at twilight. The Americans also picked up 30 other Albanians in a

foundering ship. All were put aboard the USS *Nassau* until officials decide what to do. About 60 Albanians have been hospitalized in Brindisi and Lecce to the north, most suffering from exposure during the sea journey. In the Adriatic port of Durres, hundreds of

people crowded a beach in hopes of passage west. Gunmen charged \$250, an enormous sum for residents of Europe's poorest nation — for a place on a speedboat that would carry passengers to a large docked in the harbor.

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