

A quiet city braced for war

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Marcus Tanner finds fear and determination in the Slovene capital

WITHIN minutes of the wailing of air-raid sirens in Ljubljana at 9am yesterday, anxious mothers were shepherding their children into improvised shelters in underground garages and cellars.

In one shelter, beneath my hotel, young waiters in starched white shirts helped families down the steps into safety. In the darkness, just audible above the sirens' whine, one could hear children crying.

During the three days of fighting with Yugoslav forces, Ljubljana has shaken off the sleepy air of a provincial, central European market town to take on the appearance of a city at war. Its 350,000 citizens brace themselves each day for attack from the "occupation forces" — the Yugoslav army.

The air raid scare began last week, when, during the bombardment of the airports at Maribor and Brnik, near Ljubljana, two foreign journalists were killed. The news fuelled panic that the army might try to bomb Slovenia into submission. Fears were heightened further when Slovenia rejected the harsh army ultimatum to cease resistance or face the consequences by 9am yesterday.

In the end, the air force jets that reportedly took off from military bases yesterday morning, heading for Ljubljana, never arrived. The sky stayed clear, and tension relaxed. But the breathing space is always short. Particularly after night-fall, the atmosphere of fear and siege thickens. Slovene soldiers hold the empty boulevards. The restaurants, theatres and cinemas are closed, their shutters drawn tightly down.

Each night has brought its casualties, in the strict but unofficial curfew. Of the three people who were killed in Ljubljana on Saturday, one fell victim to a policeman who opened fire when the man failed to stop at a checkpoint. Another was a Slovene policeman who died at the hands of one of the mysterious "terrorists", believed by the Slovenes to be army agents in the city. Dressed in Slovene military uniform, they wander the streets at night, opening fire on the local security forces.

Behind the barricades of lorries and buses surrounding the city, which people hope will keep at bay the Yugoslav army's tanks, security is tight. By day, the Slovene leaders give press conferences — ringed by teenage toughs in civilian clothes but wielding sub-machine guns. Few people venture on to the streets, except for hurried trips to the shops. Almost none go out at night.

Yesterday morning, the traffic lights blinked red and green on Tito Boulevard, the city's main highway. But there was no traffic to direct. The street was deserted. The only vehicles to be seen were police vans, periodically hurtling through the streets, tyres screeching and sirens wailing. The only other sound came from the loud ticking of the machine for the blind at the zebra crossing.

A handful of old people defied the self-imposed curfew to attend Mass in the baroque grandeur of the Ljubljana Cathedral.

Outside the city, the atmosphere of fear and uncertainty is more palpable. The lush Slovene countryside — dotted with small, prosperous villages and their neat white churches and well-stocked stores — have no high walls made of lorries and trucks to defend them from the Yugoslav army. Nor, for the most part, do they enjoy the security provided by thousands of Slovene police and soldiers.

Driving from the port of Koper to Ljubljana, I did not see a single civilian car on the 40-mile stretch of motorway. A patrol of Slovene soldiers warned me to "drive very fast".

"We don't know how long we can hold the motorway," they said. "Those fascists will shoot at anything that moves."

However, the only sign of the army's presence was a disabled tank lying motionless by the motorway. It had clearly been knocked out by a Slovene anti-tank gun, and its Yugoslav crew — perhaps 18 or 19-year-old conscripts from Macedonia, Kosovo or Serbia — were probably dead. They, too, were innocent pawns in the insane game being played in Slovenia by the generals of the Yugoslav army. On the side of the tank, someone had painted "Property of Slovenia". On the top, a Slovene flag flapped in the evening air.

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