

Peace hopes in Yugoslavia

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Election of Croat as federal president fulfils first condition of EC envoys' plan to end the fighting

IN A dramatic announcement hours after three European Community foreign ministers returned to Belgrade for a second urgent visit to stop Yugoslavia sliding into civil war, Stipe Mesic of Croatia declared that he had been elected chairman of Yugoslavia's collective State Presidency.

"I was elected," said Mr Mesic after emerging from a meeting of the State Presidency early today. His election ended a six-week deadlock that paralysed Yugoslavia's top administrative office, and fulfilled one of the three key objectives in an EC peace plan which the foreign ministers from Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Italy have been desperately trying to implement.

The Presidency has been paralysed since 15 May, when the hardline republic of Serbia, which is feuding with Croatia, blocked what should have been Mr Mesic's routine election in the annual rotation of representatives from the six republics and two provinces.

Earlier yesterday, Ante Markovic, the Yugoslav Prime minister, flew to Ljubljana, the Slovene capital, for talks with

Slovene leaders in a last-minute attempt to halt the three days of bloody clashes between Slovene defence forces and the Yugoslav army. Slovenia flatly turned down any talks with representatives of the "occupational forces", as it calls the army. But in a possible breakthrough that took place about the same time as the session that elected Mr Mesic, Slovene television reported that Slovenia and Mr Markovic agreed that the army should withdraw to its barracks by today.

The withdrawal of the troops would fulfil a second of the three conditions laid down by the EC troika for the implementation of a ceasefire in Slovenia. The third condition for a ceasefire as a first step towards an eventual settlement would be for Slovenia to suspend its declaration of independence.

But Milan Kucan, the President of Slo-

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venia, yesterday placed strict limits on the concessions Slovenia could offer. He placed all the blame for the fighting on Mr Markovic. With uncharacteristic passion, he insisted that "Slovenia is at war", and once again said that Slovenia would not retract its declaration of independence.

Despite the fact that jets screamed over Ljubljana and other Slovene cities and shooting erupted again on the Austrian-Slovene border, yesterday saw a lull in fighting. British officials took advantage of the lull to reverse earlier advice telling

tourists to remain in their hotels, and began evacuating them from Slovenia last night. The Foreign Office told UK citizens to "leave now if at all possible".

The EC backed up its initiative with a threat to freeze all economic aid to Yugoslavia if the warring parties rejected its terms. The EC ministers, Gianni de Michelis of Italy, Hans van den Broek of the Netherlands and Jacques Poos of Luxembourg, were to confer with federal authorities as well as the Presidents of Serbia, Slovenia and Croatia.

The troika were not the only European foreign ministers to join or lend their voices to the diplomatic fray.

The Foreign Secretary, Douglas Hurd, yesterday said there was a "very great" danger of killings, "village by village, town by town". Mr Hurd told BBC television: "At the end of the day, people cannot be

coerced ... into a particular union. But the sensible answer lies through discussion not through fighting and coercion." He said the EC should use economic and political influence to bring the nationalities together in peaceful discussions.

And the German Foreign Minister, Hans-Dietrich Genscher, announced yesterday that he would visit Belgrade and Ljubljana to set in motion crisis-resolution measures. Germany currently chairs the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE).

The 35-nation CSCE meets in Prague this week. All 35 countries are sending experts to Vienna today to discuss the military implications of the turmoil. The meeting was called by Austria, which fears the EC has misunderstood the crisis. "Anyone who talks of the need to maintain the territorial integrity of Yugoslavia fails to see that ... the political groups in Yugoslavia can no longer negotiate with each other," said the Austrian Chancellor, Franz Vranitzky.

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