

No retreat for the mountain garrison

DAILY MAIL

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EC PEACE PLAN ON THE BRINK OF FAILURE

THE latest Yugoslav peace plan was on the brink of collapse last night.

The federal army warned that it had gone on to maximum combat readiness, while leaders in the breakaway republic of Slovenia said they were preventing armoured units from pulling out, although this was a condition of an EC-sponsored peace agreement. They said they might seize tanks and armoured vehicles as 'war reparations'.

The army high command, in a statement after the EC mission left, said its troops in Slovenia were being harassed and blockaded by Slovene forces.

'The ceasefire will become invalid the moment the lives, health or dignity of Yugoslav People's Army members are endangered in any manner,' it said. 'The response to the threat of any such action will be massive and rigorous military attack.'

Army jets screamed over Slovenia in a show of force. Later it was announced that the general commanding federal operations in Slovenia had been replaced. The use of battle tanks and warplanes against Slovene territorial troops in three days of fighting had been criticised by the federal government for going too far in trying to re-establish Yugoslav sovereignty over the breakaway republic.



One of Slovenia's hundreds of women militia

Pictures: JOHN SHERBOURNE

From DAVID WILLIAMS in Postojna, Slovenia

THE newly-agreed deadline for the Yugoslav army to begin withdrawal had expired three hours ago.

Colonel Miroslav Ivanovic frowned at the question.

Had the commander of one of the biggest federal garrisons in Slovenia given the order for the hundreds of men and armour straddling the border with Italy to return?

The 49-year-old commander shook his head. 'I have not given any such order, I have not received one,' he stressed.

'I will not tell them to come back to barracks at this time... we are convinced that Slovenia is not going to respect the agreement.' The one sentence embodies many of the problems facing Yugoslav and EC diplomats as they attempt to hammer out a solution to the country's crisis.

The army deeply distrusts the politicians, it feels betrayed by the Slovenes and it is reluctant to allow the 40-odd soldiers killed during six days of fighting to die for nothing. Its officers believe they have been compromised.

Nowhere is this feeling of tension, bitterness, confusion and fear better illustrated than in the Alpine town of Postojna, 40-miles north of the Slovene capital Ljubljana.

Outside the grey and red brick garrison, federal army sentries nervously patrol. Less than 100 yards up the winding tarmac road, the militia in their grey uniforms man a roadblock.

Inside, conscripts as young as 17 clean their weapons. At least five members of the garrison have been killed so far, 14 wounded. Despite the ceasefire, one of their ammunition dumps was blown up overnight.



Firm: Col. Ivanovic

Wheelchair lift

A TOURIST in a wheelchair was carried half a mile to safety by rebel soldiers as she left Yugoslavia.

Mrs June Mortlock, 59, from Horley, Surrey, was with more than 125 tourists halted by a road block as they headed for the Italian border. The rebels es-

corted them to the other side of the barricade, where more coaches were waiting.

Yesterday another 700 holidaymakers left resorts to travel home via Austria and Italy, but many more have elected to stay on. An extra airliner to Manchester and Newcastle last night was expected to be half empty.

For years the soldiers have lived in the local community, their children have been born there. Now they are fighting their friends and their neighbours. Their wives and children are spat at and their homes and cars attacked.

Senior officers at Postojna believe the army is being falsely portrayed around the world, that the 'resistance' of the Slovene defence force makes them appear the villains.

Their welcome yesterday was warm. Sweet dark coffee and a three-quarter finished bottle of whisky was brought to Col Ivanovic's office.

'The Slovenes have not respected any agreement or the laws,' he said. 'We have suffered many casualties since the ceasefire — it is not us who are violating it.'

Col. Miladin Stankovic added: 'We have the capacity to completely destroy the whole area. We have not — but if we are completely provoked... It is said not as a threat, more as an observation. Yet it highlights the immense difficulties that the politicians now face.'