

Another war in Europe

DESPITE the best efforts of three of the European Community's Foreign Ministers, open war has now broken out in Yugoslavia. The EC's negotiators had secured the agreement of the Croats and the Slovenes to suspend their unilateral declarations of independence for a three-month cooling-off period, and had persuaded the Serbian-dominated Federal Government to allow Croatia to take her due turn at the rotating presidency. It is now plain, however, that the Federal Government has lost control of the army, which is on the rampage through Slovenia. General Blagoje Adzic, in open defiance of the civilian power, says it is too late for the ceasefire which the Slovenes had suggested and which his own superiors had ordered.

No doubt some of the actions of the Croatian and Slovene militias have been provocative and unjustifiable, but they do not in any way legitimise General Adzic's disobedience of the very Federal authority which his forces are in theory trying to defend. With the hindsight of history, his refusal to withdraw his forces to their barracks may well be judged to have been the chief cause of the final and irrevocable dissolution of the Yugoslavian Federation. If the barest minimum of force had been used in reasserting the Federation's sovereignty, it might have been possible for the constituent elements of the Federation to achieve greater autonomy than before without breaking Yugoslavia into pieces each of which, on its own, would not be economically or politically viable.

If the army prevails over the comparatively ill-trained and poorly-equipped militias, it may — for a time — succeed in holding Yugoslavia together by brute force. In such circumstances all Western aid for the reconstruction of the Yugoslav economy would have to be cut off. If, on the other hand, the militias prevail (and Yugoslavs have been expert at guerrilla warfare since the Second World War), the various ethnic groups which now constitute Yugoslavia will no doubt try to act as wholly-independent statelings, to the great detriment of the region's economy. Since military intervention by Western powers is unthinkable, the Yugoslavs will be left to fight their civil war on their own. Whether the war be long or short, the peoples of Yugoslavia must eventually learn, as the peoples of Western Europe have already (and painfully) learned, that the most promising future lies not in an irredentist and xenophobic separation nor in an enforced and artificial union but in free and friendly co-operation.

Asylum-seekers

IN 1988, 100 people a week applied for political asylum in Britain; so far this year, 1,000 people a week have done so. The UN convention on refugees, to which Britain is a signatory, forbids the expulsion of asylum-seekers with "a well-founded fear of persecution". But given the number of Third World countries with appalling human rights records or with disastrous economic policies or engaged in civil war, how are we to set limits to the numbers of potential and actual refugees? The Home Secretary, Kenneth Baker, proposes to set up a "fast-track" procedure for processing asylum applications, which will mean that thousands of refugees will be turned away from Britain without an oral hearing of their allegations of persecution.

In an ideal world, no doubt there would be an oral hearing for every rejected application, but there are simply too many applicants to be absorbed in a country that is already one of the most crowded on earth. The Government's proposed changes, therefore, are necessary on pragmatic grounds. The changes will probably make no difference to the proportion of asylum-seekers, about one in four, who are accepted as refugees. They will, however, hit hardest those who get leave to remain here for humanitarian reasons, many of whom are students whose visas have expired. But the most sensible reform will be to cut down the time it takes to process applications, now 16 months. The system cannot be made perfect but it can be more efficient.