

Slovenia accepts ceasefire as army prepares takeover

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By Judy Dempsey in Ljubljana and Laura Silber in Belgrade

SLOVENIA said last night that it was prepared to accept an unconditional ceasefire, shortly after the federal Yugoslav army declared war on the rebel republic and prepared a military takeover of the country.

Acceptance of the ceasefire amounts to a climbdown by the republic which, along with Croatia, declared independence last week. But by late last night, Slovenia had received no formal response from the army leadership that it, too, would end the fighting.

The Slovene announcement followed a declaration by Yugoslavia's top military leader - General Blagoje Adzic, the chief-of-staff - that the army would wage war against Slovenia. Gen Adzic, a hardline Serb, said on Belgrade television: "We have to accept war because we cannot accept giving up."

He spoke as violence spread to Croatia and after a day of battles between the army and Slovene militia.

As pressure from the federal army mounted for a full takeover, politicians both within and outside Yugoslavia tried to regain the initiative.

The crisis, provoked by the independence declarations of the two republics last week, will be discussed at a meeting in Prague today of senior officials from the 35-nation Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe, who are testing a new mechanism to defuse crises in member countries. The European Community last night sent a further delegation to Yugoslavia.

Meanwhile, in a shift of policy, the US, which earlier stressed the need to preserve Yugoslav unity, said yesterday it would support independence for Yugoslav republics if this could be achieved peacefully.

Mr Milan Kucan, Slovenia's president, said the republic's government was ready to abide by the ceasefire agreed at the weekend under pressure from

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the "troika" of EC foreign ministers and to allow the federal army units to return to barracks with their weapons and equipment.

Slovenia's previous attempt to attach conditions to an army withdrawal had been a sticking-point.

In his television statement, Gen Adzic, who earlier this week bitterly condemned the Slovene Territorial Defence Units for armed opposition to federal army occupation of the republic, said: "The war will be as short as possible. But we will carry it out to the end... Victims are unavoidable."

Immediately after the statement, more than 70 armoured personnel carriers, manned by federal troops, moved out of the Marshal Tito barracks in Zagreb, the capital of Croatia.

More than 2,000 Croats tried

to stop the vehicles leaving Zagreb, throwing Molotov cocktails and jeering the soldiers, while trying to block the streets with cars.

There were reports of deaths in the crowds as the federal troops rammed through the make-shift barricades and headed out of the city.

The statement by the army chief-of-staff, followed up by troop movements in Croatia, were seen by western diplomats and officials from Slovenia and Croatia as the final preparations for a military coup.

Slovene television last night said that the army was attempting a military takeover. Later, Mr Stipe Mesic, president of Yugoslavia and a Croat, and Mr Vasil Tupurkovski, president of Macedonia, issued a joint statement which was supported by Mr Kucan.

The statement, sent to Mr Ante Markovic, the federal prime minister, and General Veljko Kadijvic, the federal defence minister, called for:

- A ceasefire at 9pm local time last night;
- An end to hostilities between the Yugoslav army and Slovenia's Territorial Defence Units, removal of barricades and the return of the federal army to their original barracks, as well as withdrawal of all federal police;
- High-level talks, involving the federal presidency.

Mr Jelko Kacin, Slovenia's minister for information, last night said the signatories of the statement were still awaiting a response from Mr Markovic.
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Helping hand: A Yugoslav soldier supports a wounded comrade after a clash with Slovene militia yesterday