

SEVERAL Western leaders yesterday switched tack on Yugoslavia, tilting for the first time — some tacitly, some explicitly — towards recognising the rights to independence of the country's strife-torn republics.

The change in the response came as Europe and its North American allies prepared to meet in an emergency session of the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE) in Prague today, when a decision is expected to be taken to send in observers to monitor the conflict, following the failure of the EC's intercession at the weekend.

As diplomatic efforts dissolve in tatters, leaders are clearly hoping that agreement can still be reached — perhaps under the auspices of the EC or the meeting 35-nation CSCE, which in-

West leans towards republics' point of view

cludes the two superpowers — on how to broker a peace settlement.

With no solutions on the horizon, governments meeting in Prague today in the first emergency CSCE session will take some comfort from the existence of this new security forum. Yugoslavia's agreement is needed, however, before any decision, including the posting of observers, can be implemented.

The new line from Washington — echoed in London yesterday — was that support could in the future be given to independence for Yugoslav republics "if it could be achieved peacefully". US officials rowed back some distance from Washington's earlier insistence on main-

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taining a unified Yugoslavia, saying this had never amounted to a "rigid stance".

Foreign Office officials said Britain was "not going to hurry" towards recognising independence and the overriding disposition was still to maintain Yugoslavia as an entity. However, if it could be achieved peacefully, secession might win support. The Foreign Secretary, Douglas Hurd, speaking on Channel Four last night, said: "Since the end of communism people have had the choice, people can organise, demon-

strate and do what they wish. The key question is whether what now happens takes place in peace."

In Germany, which will chair today's CSCE meeting, a far more explicit show of support for the republics' cause came when Chancellor Helmut Kohl pressed his Community partners to soften their insistence on the preservation of Yugoslav unity at all costs.

Mr Kohl threatened Belgrade with "grave consequences" if it went "too far" and he is certain to push the CSCE

to place human rights high up the agenda in discussion on the crisis.

The German decision to come out more strongly in support of human rights for the republics than his EC partners comes after criticism in Bonn from within the ranks of all the main political parties. The clearest dissenting voice was that of the general secretary of the ruling Christian Democratic party, Volker Rühe, who called for recognition of the independence of Slovenia and Croatia. Germany must "start a movement in the EC to lead to such recognition", he said, accepting that Bonn could not do this alone.

All parties in the Bonn parliamentary

foreign affairs committee came out in favour of recognition of the breakaway republics in the event of military escalation. The Foreign Minister, Hans Dietrich Genscher, was heavily criticised for supporting the EC decision, which Bonn feels encouraged the Yugoslav government to use force.

Political positions on Yugoslavia have shifted fast since last month in Berlin, when CSCE delegates issued a statement in which they stressed the need to maintain Yugoslavia's unity and territorial integrity. Yesterday Austria and Yugoslavia engaged in bitter exchanges at the first crisis management meeting of the CSCE, which was timed to precede today's full emergency session and which ended with a call for an end to hostilities and a return to barracks by federal and Slovene forces.