

Europe's duty to intervene

IF EUROPE means anything as a concept, the civil war in Yugoslavia must be stopped. It is intolerable that, 18 months after the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe, two republics with democratically elected governments should be crushed by a communist-led army that appears to have brushed aside the politicians in Belgrade to whom it owes loyalty.

These tragic events are taking place on the borders of Italy and Austria, both of which have substantial Slovene minorities. Italy is a founding member of the European Community and of Nato. The conflict is in the EC's back yard. It will become much worse if full-scale war between Serbs and Croats breaks out in Croatia, where there is a large Serb minority and a terrible history of hatred between the two communities.

In the long era of the Cold War, any form of intervention by the West would have risked a major East-West conflagration. Prudence dictated that Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968 be left to their dreadful fates. But the Cold War is over. Communism is everywhere discredited. One of its last redoubts is in the Serbian leadership, and among the Serbian generals who dominate the federal army and are now defying the orders of the (Croatian) President, Stipe Mesic. Their assault represents a clash between unreconstructed, Brezhnevite communism and democracy.

Tomorrow EC foreign ministers will consider whether to recognise the independence of Slovenia and Croatia. They must do so. Recognition would transform a civil war into an assault on independent states. If the leaders of Slovenia or Croatia were then to appeal to EC member states for military aid to drive out the invaders, it would be hard to turn a deaf ear if their countries were being destroyed.

The EC aspires to a common foreign and security policy. This crisis underlines just how essential a European defence component has become. The British oppose the French notion that the EC should have its own military structure, since they fear it would disrupt the Atlantic alliance. The British have, however, proposed the creation of a European Reaction Force. This is not to be confused with the new Nato Rapid Reaction Force; but some of the same European troops could be assigned to it, under the political control of the Western European Union — the military grouping of all EC members save Greece, Denmark and Ireland.

Necessity is often the mother of invention. That there is an urgent need for some such force can scarcely be denied. The conflict in what has been known as Yugoslavia may last for many months if the forces of the two republics wage a guerrilla war from the mountains and forests, as they have been trained to do. If its help is invoked, Europe cannot stand by and watch the two most Westernised and prosperous republics being destroyed by an army whose leaders are essentially totalitarian. Governments of WEU member states with the necessary political and military will must make ready to answer a call for help. Their readiness would itself be a powerful factor for peace — in this and future instances.