

Slovenia on verge of more bloodshed

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SLOVENIA seemed set last night to collapse into open warfare once again.

A fragile ceasefire appeared certain to fail after the breakaway Yugoslav republic rejected a tough ultimatum from the federal presidency.

This gave the Slovenes until midnight to order all members of its

defence force and militia back to barracks and release all prisoners.

This was to be followed by the dismantling of all barricades and road blocks by noon today and by Slovenia rejoining the federation by noon on Sunday.

Crucially, all 57 border crossing points with Austria, Italy and Hungary were to be handed back to federal control, also by noon on Sunday.

Last night Slovene president Milan Kucan rejected the demands as 'impracticable and unreasonable'.

The federal army immediately warned that such a rejection would

mean 'a real possibility of this time opening a war operation of very serious dimensions'.

The presidency meeting was boycotted by Slovene representative Janez Drnovsek, but federal Prime Minister Ante Markovic stressed that it met in its official capacity as head of the army.

Mr Markovic acknowledged that the army had been acting beyond his control and that he had never sanctioned the use of force.

However, he did not say what would happen if Slovenia did not comply with all the directives.

The Red Cross said yesterday that

49 people had died so far in the fighting and 278 had been wounded. Slovenia says it holds more than 2,000 prisoners.

Although the ceasefire held throughout yesterday, allowing army tanks and infantry to return to barracks in Slovenia and Croatia, senior officers accused Ljubljana of violating the agreement by not restoring electricity, water and phone links to federal garrisons.

Six columns of tanks which left Belgrade for Slovenia and Croatia remained on their borders. At least 40 were taking positions in Serbian minority areas in Bosnia.

MEANWHILE, FAMILIES AT WAR MAKE PEACE

From DAVID WILLIAMS in Vrhnika, Slovenia.

WHEN she finally saw her soldier grandson, the old lady flung herself into his arms and held him so tightly it seemed she would never let go.

Olga Georgev had travelled two days on a coach into 'enemy' territory to find out whether George, a 19-year-old conscript, was dead or alive, wounded or safe. He was fine. 'I'm all right. I love you,' he told his grandmother.

She had made the gruelling trip from the Serbian village of Ranja to the federal garrison in the Alpine town of Postojna, 40 miles south of the Slovene capital Ljubljana.

Mrs Georgev joined an incredible Red Cross coach convoy of 400 fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters and grandparents who had travelled north determined to find news of loved ones posted by the federal army to the civil war in the breakaway republic of Slovenia.

Across a giant concrete courtyard scenes of celebration were repeated time and time again as families were reunited.

But for some as they searched, there came heart-breaking news of death or wounds.

Sobbing

One man sat hunched in the sun sobbing into his hands, his body rocking slowly backwards and forwards.

His only son had been among the first casualties of the war, killed when a helicopter was shot down by resistance fighters over Ljubljana, the Slovene capital.

Widow Genadija Gorgovc, who had travelled from the Serbian town of Novosat to find her 19-year-old son Joran, said: 'We have heard awful things of what has happened.'

'Many mothers throughout Yugoslavia are crying. Their sons are dying and they don't know why.'

The scenes at Postojna were replayed at Vrhnika and at Ljubljana too.

For some, the strain was clearly too much. When they arrived in

A mothers' army rides into enemy territory to find its lost sons

Ljubljana many sat slumped in their seats crying, hardly daring to clamber off the buses.

Officers from the federal army who accompanied the coaches looked equally confused.

But what was astonishing was the welcome the families received. There had been considerable concern about so many emotional Serbs travelling into the heartland of the 'enemy'.

But they needn't have worried. The parents of Slovenia knew how they felt.

When the first coach turned past a barricade manned by the grey

uniformed militia armed with Kalashnikovs, a crowd almost 1,000 strong, waiting in baking heat, lifted their hands above their heads and applauded.

An elderly woman dressed in blue pressed through the crowd and from a straw basket took out freshly cut red carnations. These she gave to the first women leaving each coach. She said nothing. She didn't have to.

Hours earlier along the same highway, some of the visitors' sons had been with the first convoys of tanks and infantrymen to return to the barracks at Vrhnika and Postojna as part of the latest, the fourth,



Great to see you again: Mrs Georgev with George

Picture: JOHN SHERBOURNE

fragile ceasefire deal. July 4 — the Day of the Partisan Fighter — is usually one of the proudest for the Yugoslav army, marking the day in 1941 when arms were taken up against the Nazis.

Yet yesterday it was not a time to be proud of. The young soldiers, so many of them teenage conscripts, looked exhausted as they abandoned the isolated positions they had held for the six days, positions where many of their colleagues had died.

The seven hours of talks between Slovene officials and the army overnight in Ljubljana to clinch the ceasefire seemed to have stripped them of even their pride.