

Slovene border post where voice of reason kept army guns silent

By Judy Dempsey in Ljubelj, on the Yugoslav-Austrian border



THE drive up to Ljubelj, set deep in the Slovenian Alps, is spectacular. Freshly mown meadows give way to rolling hills, and then to steep roads which lead up through forests and high into the mountains which are still capped with snow.

It is ideal country for walking and climbing. It is also ideal terrain on which to wage a guerrilla war.

At the Ljubelj pass, one of the border crossings into Austria, there are no longer any signs of fighting, few indications of any high-level security, and little to convey a sense of the war which gripped the small western republic of Slovenia earlier this week.

Here all the outward signs are that the republic has already implemented its independence. Yesterday's ultimatum from the Yugoslav

presidency may well demolish these trappings, if federal troops are again sent in to restore control over the borders.

But yesterday travellers coming across from Austria were welcomed by a sign saying "Republika Slovenija", instead of "Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia." The red-starred blue white and red Yugoslav flag no longer marks the border point. Fluttering in the light breeze is the Slovene flag, with its new emblem of a sea, a mountain and three small golden stars.

Contrary to statements from the army high command earlier this week that the federal army had "achieved its objectives", and had regained all Slovenia's border crossings, the Ljubelj pass was never captured by the federal army.

The Slovene flag, hoisted at 1300

hours on June 26, a day after the republic declared its independence, was never pulled down. Until independence day, Slovenia's border posts had been manned by Slovene border police, the frontiers had been protected by federal police, and the federal customs officers were paid by the federal government.

Since then, the Slovenes have taken control of customs, frontier policing and the border crossings.

Mr Bojan Bilak, the commander of the Ljubelj crossing, said: "On Thursday, the day after I raised the flag, about one hundred federal troops came up here. We were prepared.

"Our Territorial Defence Units (TDUs) had already moved into the hotel," he said, pointing to the wooden Alpine-style building not

far from the border. The two sides immediately started negotiations.

"We wanted to prevent bloodshed, we wanted to find a peaceful solution, we wanted to protect the property here, we wanted to protect the lives of the 50 civilians who work here," he explained.

By last Monday, the federal units had returned to their barracks without firing a single bullet.

The commander believes that federal troops withdrew because they simply did not have the equipment to stage an attack.

"They could not get their tanks out here because of the road blockades.

"The federal units had no air defence back-up. If the troops had attacked, well, they would have had to take the border with force. We were ready to fight." But there

was little sense of gung-ho attitudes among the republic's young defence forces who were sitting out on their hotel balcony. None of them was gloating about humiliating the Yugoslav army. "It is not good when you talk with arms.

I never thought it would come to this," said Mr Darko Turc, 25, and a forester by profession. Mr Turc, who on June 23 was told to prepare for call-up to the defence units, was sent with 60 other troops to Ljubelj on June 27.

"Seven or eight years ago, I thought that we would be able to live with the rest of Yugoslavia. But now, I don't think so. We have too many different views [among the republics] about political questions."

A colleague interrupted. "The fault lies with the generals at the

top of the federal army". All the young reservists were equally calm. They also seem unconcerned about the fact that the federal army could still unleash a fresh, and massive attack on the republic.

"We would go into the mountains," said Mr Zjilko Bosman, 23, who normally works in a shoe factory. "Some of us are trained in guerrilla warfare. We know our way in the mountains. We are mountain people."

As they smoked their cigarettes and drank coffee, a trickle of cars was braving the uncertainty and venturing from Austria into Slovenia.

Only the noise of their engines disturbed the peace.

The reservists hoped they were not being lulled into a false sense of security.



Members of the Slovene army look on yesterday as the Slovene flag is hoisted at the border town of Radgona after the withdrawal of federal tanks