

Slovenians reject federal ultimatum

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Ian Traynor in Ljubljana

SLOVENIA and the Yugoslav army looked poised for fresh confrontation last night after the breakaway republic rejected new ceasefire terms from the federal presidency, saying ultimatums could only be countered by other ultimatums.

The eight-point ultimatum issued in Belgrade included no commitments binding on the army except that a ceasefire would be honoured, strongly suggesting that the military was still calling the tune.

While the statement ordered the army to do little, it demanded that the Slovenes surrender the borders, release army prisoners, return their forces to barracks, unblock roads across the republic, and return all army equipment seized in combat.

"It looks like force is the argument in Yugoslavia — if not political force, then military force," President Milan Kucan of Slovenia said.

"I never interpreted political dialogue as an ultimatum. An ultimatum can only be answered by an ultimatum." Last night, Slovenia's prime minister, Lojze Peterle, said he planned to fly to Brussels today for talks with EC leaders. But he did not say whether he would plead Slovenia's case before EC foreign ministers discussing the crisis in The Hague.

In Prague, the first emergency meeting of the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe last night agreed to send a "good offices" mission to Yugoslavia.

Meanwhile, in Maribor, northern Slovenia, runaway soldiers said yesterday that Yugoslav army conscripts had

been deserting in increasing numbers since fighting eased.

The fresh crisis followed a quiet day under the truce, and the focus of the crisis appeared to shift to Croatia, the neighbouring republic that also declared independence last week.

After about 200 army tanks and vehicles were dispatched north from Belgrade on Wednesday, Croatian officials said yesterday the army was moving into Serb-populated areas of eastern Croatia in an attempt to annex the region. The claims could not be confirmed.

In Belgrade, the federal presidency met under Stipe Mesic, a Croat and the new head of state, in an attempt to assert civilian control over the military after the Yugoslav prime minister, Ante Markovic, acknowledged that the army was out of control during the fighting in Slovenia. "The federal government never ordered nor could order any army action in the way it was done," Mr Markovic said.

Yesterday's ultimatum followed talks overnight between Slovene and federal army officials. After resulting in an uneasy truce yesterday, they broke down over borders and the return of prisoners. The Slovene Red Cross said the Slovenes were holding 2,000 federal troops.

Before the ultimatum was issued, the army accused the Slovenes of not taking the ceasefire seriously. The army said: "This practically means a real possibility of this time opening a war operation of very serious dimensions."

A western diplomat in Belgrade said the presidency session was the acid test for Yugoslavia's political leadership. Mr Mesic had to prove he could impose "the fact and appearance of central political control"

over the military. The diplomat added that the meeting also needed to show that General Blagoje Adzic, the hardline Serb who is army chief of staff, had been tamed.

Mr Kucan said last night that the presidency had failed to distance itself from Gen Adzic's warmongering.

Meanwhile, there were signs that Serbia, Yugoslavia's biggest republic, might be going on the offensive, possibly in league with federal troops.

President Slobodan Milosevic's ruling Socialist Party said it had no objection to Slovenia leaving Yugoslavia, provided this could be accomplished peacefully.

The Serbian moves suggested that Mr Milosevic is willing to jettison Slovenia to concentrate on the central conflict between Serbs and Croats. Serbia wants the 600,000 Serbs living inside Croatia united with Serbia if Croatia leaves the federation.

The Croatian information minister, Hrvoje Hitrec, claimed yesterday a Yugoslav armoured convoy accompanied by extremist Serbian guerrillas was advancing on eastern Croatia, bent on annexing the region. The worsening tension between Serbia and Croatia followed a cabinet reshuffle in Zagreb on Wednesday that put a couple of Croatian nationalist hawks in charge of police and defence.

Milovan Djilas, the veteran Yugoslav dissident, said: "It is not possible for Croatia to split peacefully. If the Croats launch any attacks on the Serbs in Croatia, it will provoke an uprising of the Serbs in Croatia and Bosnia and there will be general war."

CSCE mission, page 8; Letters, page 20; West sees light, page 23; We'll take Ljubljana, page 36