

Frontier awaits stamp of authority

THE SLOVENE flag fluttered once more over the mountain border crossing of Ljubelj yesterday, and a shield which greeted a handful of visitors from neighbouring Austria read "Republic of Slovenia". No Slovene passport stamps were available at Ljubelj. A customs officer said: "We haven't received a stamp yet from Ljubljana. It will come soon."

The business of flags, emblems and stamps is not a question of folklore in Slovenia. Behind it lies the key issue of political control in the alpine republic. The control of border crossings in Slovenia is seen by most people as the litmus test of the seriousness of their declaration of independence from Yugoslavia.

Bojan Bilak, the police chief at

From Marcus Tanner in Ljubelj

Ljubelj, hoisted the Slovene flag over the crossing at 1.20pm on Wednesday last week. Some 100 Yugoslav troops arrived to put back the Yugoslav flag and shield on Thursday. Mr Bilak returned to his post, escorted by 16 Slovene soldiers, on Monday morning, when the Yugoslav soldiers pulled out.

"We didn't miss any business over the weekend, because no one came to Slovenia," he said. "From now on, we will only obey the orders of the Slovene government in Ljubljana." Mr Bilak insists that the army's decision to surrender Ljubelj back to the Slovene forces

was "very wise". "We would have taken it by force if they hadn't left," he said.

"This is a great victory for Slovenia," said his deputy, Ljubo Lukic, a Serb who has lived for 20 years in Slovenia. Alongside his Slovene colleagues, he has donned the uniform and badge of the Republic of Slovenia. From now on, he says, the customs duties from Ljubelj will be forwarded to Ljubljana and not to Belgrade.

Camping outside the nearby Kompas Hotel, 60 Slovene soldiers remain on duty, in case the Yugoslav army should return. Mostly local boys from a shoe factory in the market town of Trzic, they were blasé about their recent "victory".

"This is not a war against the

Yugoslav people," said Andrej Strukej. "It's a war against the general in Belgrade." "It's been a kind of adventure," said his colleague. "Of course, we could all get killed." For the moment, everything is calm at Ljubelj. The customs officers go about their work, while the smartly-uniformed police unobtrusively observe the handful of foreign visitors driving across the frontier into war-torn Slovenia.

But all of them know that the "war" is by no means over. "If the army occupies Ljubljana, we will go into the mountains and continue the struggle," said 23-year-old Jelko Bosman, one of the Slovene soldiers. "The Yugoslav soldiers are not trained to fight in the mountains — we are."