

Croatia braced for 'creeping occupation' violence

By Francis Harris in Zagreb

CROATIA was bracing itself yesterday for a campaign of escalating violence, termed "creeping occupation" by ministers.

The outbreak of peace in neighbouring Slovenia has concentrated minds on the far more intractable problem of Croatia's mixed ethnic regions.

Already common, violence has flared in the larger rebel republic since Yugoslavia's latest crisis began 10 days ago.

It is a problem for ordinary people. The country's cars have two-letter regional identification codes. These days the code can result in the death of occupants.

An increasing number of vehicles in Croatia have no number plates. Motorists put them on back shelves, ready to be grabbed and hidden on approaching one of the scores of roadblocks that slow travel in mixed regions where gunmen roam the hills, occasionally sniping at traffic.

Croatian television carries daily reports on the roads considered safe for travel. The reports are like few others in the world. Well-spoken presenters ignore traffic jams to warn of gunmen and roadblocks. Yesterday four roads were considered dangerous.

One Croatian businessman in a new Opel, who asked to be identified only as Alovic, said his journey west through the self-proclaimed Serbian state of Krajina in Croatia could bring trouble. He hoped removing the Zagreb plates would save his life.

Cars driving in Zagreb with number plates from Knin, the administrative centre of Krajina, have CRO strickers to indicate their Croatian ethnic origin, rather than YU for Yugoslavia, which the Serbs employ.

Krajina and the mixed ethnic region of Eastern Slavonia are also alive with gunmen.

The 600,000-strong Serbian population is mixed with Croats, the towns and villages containing people from both communities. Motorists have little way of knowing who controls an area until they come upon a roadblock or a village with a flag.

Both sides have large irregular forces, joined by Croatian security men and federal troops ostensibly keeping the peace.

The worst recent trouble was in the town of Borovo Naselje, near the Serbian border, where Croatian National Guardsmen and Serbian Chetnik gunmen fought



War by numbers: a tank on guard in Croatia where a car's registration can mean life or death

for 10 hours. Shooting between the two sides also took place in nearby Tenja.

In Krajina, a 16-year-old Croat girl was said to have been killed and two friends wounded by unknown gunmen.

Explosions were reported near Zadar, including one which

destroyed an empty car. In Benkobač the Croatian police chief was reportedly kidnapped and later released by Serbian gunmen. Two Croatian civilians were said to have been kidnapped.

Tanjug, the Yugoslav news agency, reports similar stories each day from the Serbian side,

making the occasional allegation of massacres. The only common theme is the lack of evidence.

But it has become clear that the Croatian government is trying to avoid war, both in an attempt to foster sympathy in the West and because its forces appear barely prepared for fighting. The newly

formed security forces have not been notable for their successes in recent months.

Many of them believe the Serbian gunmen are holding strategic points for eventual federal army intervention. According to these Croats, the question is not if but when.

Were the Serbian-dominated military to take over the mixed regions, it could salvage its reputation with a domestic audience unimpressed by the recent performances in Slovenia.

The theory supposes it could then call a ceasefire, halting its forces on the inter-ethnic border and leaving the rump of Croatia to be an independent state.

But the Croats have pledged to fight for the regions which contain large numbers of their people.

The Croats point to the tank columns on the Serbian-Croatian border, believing they could be used to "restore order".

They also allege the Serbs have been ferrying gunmen across the Danube into Croatia in rubber dinghies.

About the only piece of good news yesterday was the return of three salami lorries in Krajina, said to have been taken by the Serbs. But the company said the meat was missing, believed eaten.