

Croatia fears early concerted attack but Yugoslav federal army hints that it might pull out of Slovenia

Serbia ready to go to war, says leader

THE INDEPENDENT 7/7/91

ALL-OUT confrontation between Serbs and Croats lurched closer yesterday when Serbia declared that it was ready to fight alongside the federal army to protect its interests.

The Communist President of Serbia, Slobodan Milosevic, dramatically raised the stakes by telling his people that they should be ready for war. "The citizens of Serbia should be ready for the defence of their country," he said. "Serbia cannot be protected from the war to which it may be exposed if it is not ready for this war — that is to say, if it is asleep in the conviction that it cannot take place."

As Serbia and Croatia braced for conflict, the Yugoslav army said it did not want a war with Slovenia and hinted that it might soon withdraw from the break-away republic. General Veljko Kadijevic, the Defence Minister and chief of the army high command, indicated that the only way to avoid further conflict in Slove-

'Citizens of Serbia should be ready for the defence of their country' — Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic

nia was to pull out. "Since the leadership of Slovenia is ignoring the presidency and the attacks on the army continue, the high command will in accordance with this very soon propose adequate decisions to the presidency of Yugoslavia," Gen Kadijevic said on Belgrade television.

Shortly before Mr Milosevic's statement, delivered on Serbian television and radio, officials in Croatia, Serbia's traditional rival, said they feared an attack by the federal army in co-ordination with the Serbian leadership. Croatia's information minister, Hrvoje Hitrec, said war with Serbia was possible "in the next few days", and it would make the violence in Slovenia last week seem "a Disneyland" in comparison.

This may be no exaggeration. Not only are Serbia and Croatia the most populous republics of

From Tony Barber in Belgrade and Steve Crawshaw in Zagreb



Yugoslavia, but their peoples have a history of bloody rivalry more intense than the quarrel over Slovenia. Mr Hitrec said holidays for medical staff had been cancelled, and Croatian forces were on standby for full mobilisation. He added: "The mobilisation of reserve forces in Serbia is a very dangerous fact. Besides, the army is not going back to barracks. Terrorist attacks are increasingly frequent. This makes us think that this is a synchronised start for an attack against Croatia."

The Serbian President's statement yesterday carried particular weight because he has been virtually silent since Slovenia and Croatia declared independence on 25 June. On Friday his ruling party, the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS), made a pact with other Serbian political parties to put aside their differences in the name of Serbian unity. Patriarch Pavle, the spiritual leader of the nine million Orthodox Serbs, gave his blessing to the pact.

Mr Milosevic said the federal army should be posted in all parts of the country where people did not want Yugoslavia to break up. This was tantamount to saying the army should intervene in Croatia, which has a 600,000 Serbian minority who have been clamouring for protection from the republic of Serbia.

The army already has 70,000 soldiers on Croatian territory, according to officials in Zagreb. A majority of the federal army's officer corps are Serbian Communists.

Serbs and Croats fought a civil war in the 1940s in which more than 1 million people died. Although united by their similar languages and Slavic identity, they are divided by religion, culture and different visions of Yugoslavia's future. Last Wednesday the SPS said it would not object to Slovenia's secession if it occurred peacefully. The federal army's deployments since Wednesday have made clear that the Communist generals are less interested in keeping Slovenia in Yugoslavia than in extending their control over ethnic Serbs outside Serbia.

Mr Hitrec said he had been an optimist until a week ago. Now, though, "the possibilities of a serious war are growing. There is a bigger chance of war than finding a peaceful solution." In such a war, "thousands of people would die — more than thousands".

Because of its large Serbian minority, Croatia "can expect enemy action even on our territory", from a "Fifth Column of trai-

'If it happens it will happen very soon . . . the public should be very worried' — Croatian Minister Hrvoje Hitrec

tors", he said. Preparations for a general mobilisation had been made, and this could now be done "within a few hours". His warning came as plans went ahead for yet another international crisis meeting in Yugoslavia, which is due to take place today.

The European Community "troika", comprising the foreign ministers of Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Portugal, will hold talks with Yugoslav leaders, including the Prime Minister, Ante Markovic, and the President, Stipe Mesic. There were unconfirmed reports that the leaders of the two most hostile republics, President Milosevic of Serbia and President Franjo Tudjman of Croatia, would also hold separate talks, in a last-minute attempt to fend off war.

Further reports, page 17
Leading article, page 22