

The peace killers

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Twelve die in new
clashes as tanks
try to part warring
Yugoslav factions

YUGOSLAV Federal Army tanks opened fire in the middle of a clash between Serbs and Croats yesterday, in a battle that left at least 12 dead.

It was the first incident involving Federal forces in Croatia's violent ethnic feud with its Serbian minority.

The flare-up threatened to tilt the delicate balance as Yugoslav leaders struggled to avert all-out war.

Army tanks and armoured personnel carriers were drawn into the battle after moving in to halt fierce fighting between



From ANNA PUKAS
in Belgrade

the rival groups in the village of Tenja, near the Danube which forms the border between Serbia and Croatia.

Official Yugoslav figures said there were 12 dead and 24 wounded. Belgrade radio said the dead were 10 Croatians and two Serbian fighters. But Croatian officials in Zagreb reported dozens dead in the battle-scarred village.

The Croatian Defence Ministry accused the Federal Army of opening fire on the republic's forces. And Mate Salinovic, deputy police chief in nearby Osijek, said: 'If there were no army, we would solve this in half-an-hour.'

Croatia declared independence from the Serbian-dominated Yugoslav federation on June 25, along with Slovenia. The Tenja battle has confirmed fears that Croatia could be the scene of the worst fighting.

At 2am, a Croatian military base had come under attack from Serbian nationalist 'Chetnik' units. Croats retaliated with artillery and sniper fire.

The Yugoslav National Army sent heavy equipment ahead of the Serbian lines to act as a buffer. Croatian forces claim they held their fire to avoid hitting Federal troops, but the Serbs then fired mortar at the Croats while remaining shielded from return fire.

One Croatian national guardsman, Ivan Simic, said: 'The Chetniks are acting just as they did in the war, with dirty tactics. They are hiding behind the Yugoslav federal army.'

Hostility

'The shooting went on all night and morning. Many of my comrades are wounded and I was hit by a splinter from a mortar shell.'

Houses along the main road were pock-marked with bullets. Some had rocket holes blasted in their roofs. Bullet-riddled cars and trucks with shattered windshields stood abandoned at the roadside.

Earlier Serbian president Slobodan Milosevic had gone on television to urge all Serbs: 'Be ready to defend peace and to watch out for those with different interpretations of Serbian interests.'

Nearly a million Serbs live outside the territory of their home republic, with 700,000 in Croatia alone.

Croatian information minister Hrvoje Hitrek said the battles in Slovenia between independence forces and the federal army 'would be like Disneyland compared to the deep hostility again unleashed between Serbia and Croatia.'

The Federal Army is heavily dominated by Serbs. But spokesman Lieutenant Colonel Miodrag Starcevic insisted it would engage in any Serbo-Croat conflict only to separate the warring factions.

Locals have already reverted to using the World War II names for the fighting forces. Serbs call the Croats 'Ustashe' after a pro-Nazi puppet regime, while the Croats refer to the Serbs as 'Chetniks' after the militant Serb nationalists of wartime.