Milosevic seeks to turn vision into a reality

Carving Greater Serbia out of Yugoslavia promises to be a bloody process, writes Judy Dempsey

WHILE diplomatic activity is focused on resolving the conflict over Yugoslavia's external borders, a more bloody dispute - over the country's internal borders - is in the making.

"Whether or not the west wakes up to what is really happening in Yugoslavia, they are about to witness a most terrible and bloody endgame engineered by Slobodan Milosevic," says a Yugoslav observer. His view is that the violent events unfolding in his country can no longer be halted, because Mr Milosevic, president of Serbia, is set on creating a Greater Serbia.

The first step in the process was the Serbian-engineered deadlock in the federal presidency on May 15, when the Croats decided to remove their president Stipe Mesic, saying that he was not committed to the federation. By doing so, Serbia would gain control over its external borders through its declaration of independence and the rebel republic's humiliation of federal unity, done in the form of the declaration of independence on June 25.

Serbia engineered the declaration of independence on June 25 to give Mr Milosevic an opportunity to use the federal army, and the Chetniks, the ultra-right wing royalists, to pursue his goal of a Greater Serbia.

The army remains determined to pursue its goal of securing all Yugoslavia's external borders. Thus, Serbia's control over its external borders through its declaration of independence and the rebel republic's humiliation of federal unity, done in the form of the declaration of independence on June 25. While the army tried last week to force Slovenia into submission, Mr Milosevic continued to plot with the intention of fomenting instability in Croatia. The Chetniks were more than willing to oblige.

Over the past six months, the Chetniks, under Mr Vojislav Seselj, have been organizing the ethnic Serbs in the republics of Croatia and Bosnia-Hercegovina. They share Mr Milosevic's goal: a Greater Serbia.

The Chetniks, who are recruiting volunteers for their own army in Serbia, have re-awakened the latent hatred between ethnic Serbs and Croats living in Slavonia, eastern Croatia, and in the Serb-inhabited Krajina, south-eastern Croatia.

"Milosevic, through the Chetniks, wants to create a climate of fear and ethnic unrest in Croatia, so that the Croatian government will be forced to make a deal with Milosevic before blood spills into the rivers," a Serb intellectual commented.

The Serb-dominated army has played a crucial role in fomenting instability in Croatia. It has been more than willing to oblige. The army was about to show Mr Milosevic's plans. By trying to teach the rebel republic of Slovenia a lesson, the army wanted to show Slovenia that it would not allow that republic to secede. But its goals have begun to shift in the direction of Mr Milosevic's plans.

Heavily-armed federal units are now positioned close to the ethnic Serb community in Croatia, and in Bosnia-Hercegovina. These units, made up of nationalist Serbs, are there precisely to protect the Serb minorities from the Croats.

Mr Milosevic hopes that the army will fight on the side of the Serb minorities in Croatia to force the Croatian government to the negotiating table. This may seem ironic, since Serbia and Croatia harbour deep historical hatred towards each other. However, Mr Franjo Tudjman, the nationalist president of Croatia, and Mr Milosevic, share the same goals. Each wants the respective Croats and Serbs incorporated into his respective republics.

Realization of these goals would involve a radical redesigning of Yugoslavia's internal borders. Indeed, Borba, the pro-federal government daily, reported last March how Bosnia-Hercegovina would cede parts of Serb-inhabited regions of Croatia to Serbia. In return, parts of western Bosnia-Hercegovina, in which ethnic Croats live, would be attached to Croatia.

The impact among the Moslem community of any carve-up of Bosnia-Hercegovina would be enormous. The Moslems, which make up 43 per cent of the republic's 4.7m population, regard Bosnia-Hercegovina as the guarantor of their security and rights as a recognised nationality.

Mr Alija Izetbegovic, president of Bosnia-Hercegovina, and a Moslem with close contacts with Libya and Iran, has warned repeatedly against any dismemberment of the republics. For their part, the Moslems, who are also heavily armed, would fight to defend the territorial integrity of their republic.

The federal army might support the Milosevic/Tudjman prognosis, because the army is now dominated by nationalist Serbs, and because the country's external borders would remain intact.

Furthermore, assuming Slovenia's declaration of independence stands, the army will back down from occupying Slovenia again if it can secure guarantors, from the European Community, and Yugoslavia's political leaders, that the future status of Slovenia's borders will be negotiated.

However, the realization of a Greater Serbia contains many uncertainties. It is not certain that either Mr Milosevic or President Tudjman can prevent the violence between ethnic Serbs and Croats in Croatia from escalating into a full-scale civil war, in which the Serb-dominated army would side with the ethnic Serbs.

But we need not worry about whether there are armies anymore, as we are now in a world where there are no longer trusted Serbians, who have never been granted a Greater Serbia at any expense. We wanted out. And fast. We