

EC sends in observers

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to preserve ceasefire

THE EUROPEAN Community will today pursue its peace-keeping efforts in Yugoslavia by sending a forward team of 15 civilian and military personnel to prepare to monitor the ceasefire agreed on Sunday between Belgrade and the republics of Slovenia and Croatia.

Dutch officials said the team, to be dispatched jointly by the EC troika of the Netherlands, Luxembourg and Portugal, will lay the ground for the deployment as soon as possible of an official 50-strong observer force. The make-up of that force will be discussed at an emergency meeting of EC foreign ministers in The Hague tomorrow.

There was some satisfaction in Brussels that the EC-mediated talks on the Adriatic island of Brioni at the weekend had apparently brought a breakthrough in the conflict. But this was mixed with an awareness that the peace could quickly be destroyed by further military clashes between Serbia, Yugoslavia's largest republic, and the two breakaway republics.

Last night, a federal army unit came under mortar fire from Croats on the border between Croatia and Serbia, and the army re-

From David Osborne
in Brussels
Steve Crawshaw in Ljubljana
and Tony Barber in Belgrade

turned fire, according to the Tanjug news agency. The federal troops were guarding a bridge over the Danube between Backa Palanka in Serbia and Ilok in Croatia when mortar rounds were fired from the Croatian side.

The Croatian President, Franjo Tudjman, said on television earlier last night that his republic accepted the peace plan but Croatia expected the federal government to respect the republic's independence declaration. The Slovene President, Milan Kucan, said the agreement "opens the door for negotiations" on independence.

Serbia, for its part, yesterday went ahead with military exercises. The Serbian President, Slobodan Milosevic, travelled to the town of Aradac in the Serbian-controlled province of Vojvodina to watch manoeuvres by the province's territorial defence forces. A statement said the exercise was to "test the mobilisation readiness, marksmanship training and tac-

tics, as well as the combat readiness" of the forces.

The Brioni agreement envisaged a ceasefire in Slovenia, the return of Slovene and Yugoslav forces to their quarters by midnight last night and negotiations on Yugoslavia's future to start by 1 August. Slovenia was due to return all equipment captured from the Yugoslav army, lift its blockade of army units and hand over all remaining prisoners.

But many Slovenes see the Brioni agreement as a climbdown. Under the terms, Slovene guards will continue to be in charge of their orders, but — more importantly — customs dues will go to the authorities in Belgrade.

Jacques Delors, the European Commission President, acknowledged the fragility of the Community's peace efforts. "If you mean that we are at the mercy of any incident and we're trembling in anticipation, then I agree."

It is likely that the formal observer force, when it leaves for Yugoslavia, will be made up of personnel from other countries of the 34-nation Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe as well as the EC.

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