



A member of the Croatian National Guard in Borovo, Croatia, avoids sniper fire from Borovo Selo, the Serb part of the town. The two sectors have been exchanging fire for four days *Photograph: David Rose*

Fancy ousts fact in the battle for the headlines

ONE thing is certain: nobody can complain that the Croatian publicity machine is overcautious about unsubstantiated allegations. If it is colourful tales that you are looking for, then Croatia can always oblige.

Day after day in the Croatian capital, Zagreb, press conferences take place at which journalists seek facts and figures about the growing conflict in Yugoslavia. Instead they are treated to colourful stories which are frequently contradictory and have almost always been forgotten by

From Steve Crawshaw
in Zagreb

the next day. It sometimes seems the ministers who turn up to the press conferences live in a rhetoric-rich, fact-free fairyland.

Yesterday there were categorical statements about Securitate employees on Serbia's official payroll. The day before, there was talk of a plan to blow up a nuclear power station (dredged up from an old boast by one of Serbia's far right leaders). And there have

been a clutch of stories about shady characters with shadier codenames who have allegedly hatched evil plots against Croatia. Some of the allegations may even be true — by the law of averages, some of them should be. And yet, no evidence is ever adduced.

As a result, the propaganda battle has started to backfire. Many allegations are now ignored by the foreign press. It would not be surprising if some perfectly accurate stories have thus also been ignored.

Privately the more sensible

Croat officials agree that the government ministers who indulge in public repetition of bar-room talk do Croatia's cause nothing but harm. One senior official said that he was "ashamed" of the daily antics in the press conference room in the Zagreb parliament building.

And yet, for the moment, the circus continues. The Croat press has, with a few honourable exceptions, almost entirely lost its scepticism (in the Communist era, the Croat press was peppered with healthy disrespect). Now it re-

prints even the most fantastical official allegations about the "terrorists" without reservations. It is an unhappy situation, which may eventually change.

Even the number of casualties — figures, admittedly, notoriously difficult to determine immediately — remain more confused than they need be. If the government does not know exact figures, why not say so? Instead, the Information Minister, Hrvoje Hitrec, said yesterday that more people had died in one battle in eastern Croatia on Sunday than

in all the Slovene violence. According to the Red Cross, around 50 people died in Slovenia. So, 50 in east Croatia in a single day?

It was a dramatic allegation, which — coming from the lips of the Information Minister — ought to carry considerable weight. In normal circumstances, it would do so. But Mr Hitrec's neighbour on the platform said that the number of confirmed deaths was less than 10 — still a remarkably high figure, but almost overshadowed by Mr Hitrec's dramatic claim.