

In Croatia the time for killing begins

THE INDEPENDENT

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From Marcus Tanner
in Osijek, Croatia

COUNCIL workmen were busy polishing the anti-aircraft guns and armoured cars of the Croatian National Guard outside Osijek town hall yesterday. "In Brioni they think and talk. Here in Slavonia, people are dying," Igor Brandevic, 25, a Croatian member of the National Guard, said. "Now is the time for shooting. We've had enough."

The peace deal struck on Sunday between Yugoslavia's warring leaders on the Adriatic island of Brioni seems far away from Slavonia, a region in eastern Croatia with a big Serbian minority. The fertile wedge of flat farmland has been wrenched in a violent struggle between Serbian paramilitaries called

Chetniks, and the Croatian police.

In Tenja, a predominantly Serbian enclave four miles from Osijek, four Croatian policemen and a Yugoslav army officer died on Sunday in a battle between Croats and local Serbs. Upturned trucks, destroyed cars and houses peppered with bullet holes were a reminder of the previous day's battles.

In Davska Street, a burnt-out shell of a house was smouldering. Nine Croatian police were trapped in the house behind Serbian lines, when Yugoslav army tanks arrived and cut them off from their colleagues. The four policemen perished, picked off one by one by Serbian snipers. On the porch of

the house, flies buzzed around a thick pool of half-dried blood. The dead body of one of the Croatian policemen was left in the house until yesterday morning. He was shot holding a grenade, which locals feared would explode.

Two Yugoslav army tanks were parked in the road, their guns trained on a Croatian police unit holding the other end of the village. "The army opened fire on us," one Croatian policeman said. "They always do, if they think the Chetniks are in trouble."

Igor Brandevic once worked in a restaurant. Now he commands a local unit of the Croatian National Guard, a paramilitary formation intended to form the

backbone of a future Croatian army. At the National Guard headquarters in Osijek, hundreds of burly young Croats, dressed in army fatigues and kitted out with Kalashnikov sub-machine-guns, pored over maps and planned their next operation.

The National Guard members say their enemies are the Yugoslav army and the Chetniks. They claim that the Chetniks do the killing, and the army then moves in to shield them from the Croatian police. "We have much to

do," Igor said. "So many Chetniks and army troops are against us. The army gives them the weapons and helps them to kill Croats."

On the other side of the barricades in Tenja, Milan Trbojevic, a local Serbian leader, blames the fighting which has raged for months in Slavonia on the nationalist aspirations of the Croatian leaders for an independent state. "Serbs will never accept to live in an independent Croatian state," he said.

The Serbian paramilitaries around Osijek draw most support from the swelling ranks of the unemployed. The Croatian economy is in recession, and in a climate of mounting ethnic tension,

thousands of Serbs have been sacked.

Zarko Cubrilo, aged 41, joined the paramilitaries in the fight against the Croatian police, after he was sacked in February. "Twenty years I worked in Osijek as a supervisor on a building site. Then one day, they sacked all the Serbs and left the Croats in their jobs.

"All our evils began when the HDZ [the ruling party in Croatia] came to power. The most they will ever allow us is permission to clean the streets," he added bitterly.

Few expect the peace agreement from Brioni to have any effect on the level of fighting in Slavonia. The flat plain, dotted with prosperous market

towns, is frontier territory. Crops go untended and villages become deserted. Croats have fled to the Red Cross centres in cities such as Osijek. The Serbs have fled over the border to Serbia proper.

In Tenja barricades were going up once more. Serbian snipers trained guns on the towers of nearby Osijek. "The Croats want to drive us out," one local said. At National Guard headquarters in Osijek, Croat youths prepared for another night of action.

"Of course I don't like doing this," said Igor. "I have a wife and a two-year-old daughter. But as I said, we've had enough. It's the time for shooting."