

Bosnian president appeals to EC for help

FINANCIAL TIMES 12/7/91

Fears grow Serbia and Croatia will try to carve up Bosnia-Herzegovina, reports Judy Dempsey

THE president of Yugoslavia's central republic of Bosnia-Herzegovina, Mr Alija Izetbegovic, is appealing to the European Community to help prevent Serbia and Croatia from carving up the republic.

The decision to send a letter to the EC was made amid mounting fears in Bosnia-Herzegovina that Mr Franjo Tudjman, the president of Croatia, and Mr Slobodan Milosevic, the president of Serbia, would try to end the ethnic violence in Croatia by redrawing Yugoslavia's internal borders.

Under plans being discussed informally between Serbia and Croatia, Serb-inhabited regions in Croatia would be attached to Serbia, while the Croat regions in Bosnia-Herzegovina would be integrated with Croatia.

"I have heard about those negotiations between Tudjman and Milosevic," said Mr Izetbegovic yesterday.

"If they persist with this plan, we will resist. There is very strong resistance here to any break-up of Bosnia-Herzegovina. We will also call for international assistance."

Mr Izetbegovic said he was preparing a letter to Mr Hans van den Broek, the Dutch foreign minister, who has been co-ordinating discussions between the EC and Yugoslavia's political leaders.

"We shall send the letter today [Thursday] to him. We will present to him the situation in Bosnia-Herzegovina. We will ask a mission of goodwill to come here. And if things

escalate, we will ask for a team of observers to be sent," he explained.

Any attempt to break up the republic forcibly could undermine five decades of peaceful co-existence between the republic's three largest ethnic groups.

These include the Moslems, who make up 43 per cent of the 4.2m population, the Serbs (33 per cent) and the Croats (19 per cent). Political parties drawn from these nationalities form the republic's coalition government.

Mr Izetbegovic is leader of the (Moslem) Party for Democratic Action, the republic's largest political party.

The Moslems, who were granted the status of a separate nationality by the late President Tito, might decide to fight to preserve the territorial integrity of Bosnia-Herzegovina, rather than choose between living in a greater Croatia and a greater Serbia. Moslem leaders were yesterday not prepared to consider a solution which would leave them with a rump of the republic, however autonomous.

Mr Stjepan Kljuic, leader of the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ), Bosnia-Herzegovina's third-largest party, also expressed nervousness yesterday about any possible break-up of the republic. "Only the members of the European Community can save Bosnia-Herzegovina from civil war. We have to internationalise the problem," he said.

The decision to appeal for international assistance was precipitated after the government in Sarajevo intercepted on Wednesday night a secret telex sent by the Serbian Democratic party (SDS), Bosnia-Herzegovina's second largest party, to all local councils throughout the republic.

The SDS ordered the councils to obey the call-up issued last week by the federal army, despite opposition to any mobilisation by the Bosnian government.

Over 4,000 Bosnians have already refused to answer the call-up.

"There is a strong connection between the SDS and Mr Milosevic," said Mr Kljuic.

A government minister added: "By trying to send reinforcements to the north-west of the republic, along the border with Croatia where the Serb minority is concentrated, the SDS, the federal army, and Milosevic are preparing to protect the Serbs in any major conflict, and are also carving out the borders of a Greater Serbia."

But Mr Velibor Ostojic, minister of information and a member of the SDS's leadership, yesterday denied that his party was receiving direct instructions from Mr Milosevic.

"We are only obeying the federal institutions and the federal army," he said. But he added: "None of the Serbs in Yugoslavia want to live separated from their main land - that is, Serbia."

TWO DIE IN SERBIAN-CROATIAN GUN BATTLE

Serbian nationalists and Croatian militiamen clashed in an eight-hour gun-battle that killed at least two people yesterday, doctors in a local hospital said, Reuter in Osijek, eastern Croatia, and Laura Silber in Belgrade report.

They said three people were wounded in one of the fiercest ethnic clashes in Yugoslavia for weeks when more than 100 Croatian militiamen surrounded a house in Osijek, a town about 90 miles northwest of Belgrade.

Militiamen pumped hundreds of rounds of bullets into the house and the Serbs fired back from inside. The building was shattered by machine-gun fire.

Meanwhile, the Yugoslav federal army accused the breakaway republic of Slovenia of violating the EC peace agreement and warned that "the Slovene people would pay the price".

Colonel Milan Gvero told journalists: "Despite all agreements, [Slovenia] is planting mines, tank traps, and taking up favourable positions for battle."

A fragile ceasefire was reached earlier this week between the federal army and the leaders of the six republics, under EC pressure.

Slovenia in turn accused the army of launching an incursion into Slovene territory, when five army armoured personnel carriers crossed the Croat-Slovene border.



Strollers in Zagreb yesterday are flanked by the flags of Slovenia (left) and Croatia