



Firefight . . . Croatian National Guard soldiers use a truck for cover during fresh clashes between Serbs and Croats in Osijek yesterday PHOTOGRAPH: OLEG POPOV

Croatian police in shoot-out with Serbs

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Barney Petrovic in Belgrade

AT LEAST three people died and six were wounded in bloody clashes between Croatian police and Serbian nationalists in the past 24 hours, shattering the fragile five-day ceasefire in Yugoslavia.

In the Croatian town of Osijek, an eight-hour battle raged between policemen and Serb civilians. The fighting in Osijek, about 90 miles north-west of Belgrade, was some of the worst so far between Serbs and Croats, who declared their pre-

dominantly Roman Catholic republic of 4.5 million people independent from Yugoslavia on June 25.

According to witnesses, some 100 Croatian policemen surrounded a house in the heart of the town and opened fire with machine-guns. Serbs inside the house returned fire with automatic weapons and threw hand grenades.

In another incident overnight, Serbian nationalists ambushed a patrol of Croatian policemen near Osijek killing one and wounding three others.

In Zagreb, the Croatian information minister, Hrvoje Hitrec,

warned at a press conference that Croatia would face a full-scale attack by the Serb-dominated Yugoslav army in 10 to 15 days.

The latest incidents in Croatia led to the postponement of today's scheduled meeting of the leaders of Yugoslavia's six republics. It would have been the first such meeting since the crisis erupted.

Instead, the eight-member Yugoslav collective state presidency will meet with key ministers of the federal government to decide how to run the country during the three-month moratorium on independence

agreed under the Brioni agreement arranged by the European Community.

However, the EC, determined to head off full-scale civil war, went ahead yesterday with plans to send an advance team to prepare the way for about 50 EC peace observers due to be deployed in the north.

The 10-member advance team arrived in Zagreb, capital of Croatia, and negotiations began for them to proceed to Slovenia, the most northerly and economically the best-off of the six Yugoslav republics.

It was still unclear yesterday if the EC observers would be

allowed into Slovenia.

The republic's president, Milan Kucan, told reporters: "The federal army and administration don't want the observers to come to Slovenia while the consequences of war are still apparent."

● At least 26,660 Serbs have fled ethnic fighting in Croatia, the information minister of the Serbian-controlled province of Vojvodina said yesterday. "We think more and more will come — from Zagreb, Slovenia, and other places," Milan Lucic said. "Before it was just from eastern Croatia, now it is people coming from all over Yugoslavia."