

# Belgrade in stormy debate on EC plan

YUGOSLAVIA'S eight-member State Presidency was locked in stormy crisis talks yesterday over whether to adopt a European Community peace plan, as Branko Kostic, the Yugoslav vice-president, called for Slovenia and Croatia to be allowed to secede.

Western diplomats said the Defence Minister, Veljko Kadijevic, the army representative at the talks, objected to basing the EC observers in Croatia. Some officials said this was because the observers could hamper any military plans for future operations to force the republic to stay in the Yugoslav state. One Western diplomat said the argument over where to base the EC observers was "only a symbol of a far bigger fight". He added: "The whole issue of the role of the army is coming out. I have the feeling the army has not given up."

The United States said it was "gravely concerned" by the Yugoslav military's continued mobilisation and opposed the use of force even in the pursuit of national unity. "We caution all parties, and particularly the Yugoslav military, against any resort to violence, the consequences of which would be tragic for Yugoslavia," Margaret Tutwiler, the State Department spokeswoman, said.

In a statement issued during the meeting, Mr Kostic, who represents Montenegro on the Presidency and belongs to the Serbian bloc, said there was "no reason why we should force Slovenes, Croats or any other nation to live together in Yugoslavia. Whether Yugoslavia survives in these or new frontiers, only time will tell."

Mr Kostic called for federal elections to be staged as soon as possible, with the aim of holding a new parliament, composed only of the peoples who wish to remain within Yugoslavia. He admitted it was no longer realistic for the Yugoslav army to try to disarm the armed forces of Slovenia and Croatia. Instead, he suggested the Serb-dominated federal forces should "protect endangered Serbs" in areas where they form compact minorities in Croatia and

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From Marcus Tanner  
in Belgrade

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Bosnia.

It was better to use the Yugoslav army to protect Serbs in Croatia than to call up a Serbian army composed of reservists, he said. "That way we at least stop a civil war between Serbs and Croats. The Balkans have already provoked two world wars. I can't exclude the possibility of Yugoslavia starting a third."

Last week, the Serbian leader, Slobodan Milosevic, said Yugoslavia would be "happier and richer if the republics who don't like it, get out". As a member of the Serb bloc, Mr Kostic's view may be another example of diplomatic "kite flying". These endorsements of the right of the "rebel republics" to secede point to a growing division of opinion between Serbia and Yugoslav army commanders.

Serbia will clearly not block the secession of Slovenia and the non-Serb parts of Croatia, if it can swallow the rest. But army leaders appear committed to maintaining Yugoslavia's borders intact. Serb militias already have *de facto* control over large chunks of territory in other republics. Armed bands of Serbs have seized control over Krajina, a large strip of southern Croatia, and also control chunks of Bosnia. A battle for land is raging in eastern Croatia.

Until now Croat leaders have reacted with scepticism to Serbia's official statements. They fear that Serbia may use Croatia's secession as an excuse to annex large amounts of territory, including lands where Croats form the majority. Zarko Domljan, Speaker of the Croat parliament, claimed earlier this week that talks between Serbia and Croatia over boundaries were taking place. But the Yugoslav President, Stipe Mesic, who is also Croatian, compared Mr Milosevic to Hitler: "He has a big appetite for territory," he complained. "He can also be compared with Hitler because Hitler said he wanted to protect Germans outside Germany."



Men of the Croatian National Guard on duty in Osijek, the provincial capital of Slavonia, eastern Croatia, scene of fierce ethnic clashes earlier this week Photograph: David Rose