

Budapest braced for influx of refugees

HUNGARY is braced for a huge influx of ethnic Hungarians if the fighting worsens in Yugoslavia. Both military and civil authorities are building camps for refugees, although none so far have crossed the border. "There is a similar tendency there as in Romania, with nationalist forces that need an image of an enemy," said Ivan Baba, head of policy planning at the Foreign Office. "The Hungarians there are not armed."

Serb Chetnik guerrillas surrounded the village of Korogy in Serbia this week, sealing off the 5,000-odd ethnic Hungarians. A Hungarian television crew has reported from behind the Chetnik lines that they have already torched the neighbouring Croat village of Celje. That has prompted fears by the district police chief that the Hungarian enclaves could be next. The Chetnik actions prompted an inquiry from Hungary to the Yugoslav authorities, who answered that there was no real threat.

But several Hungarians have already been killed near Korogy. Behind the bland diplomacy, a war of words between Hungary and Serbia is hotting up. Earlier this week Hungary's Prime Minister, Jozsef Antall, threw one more match onto the Balkan tinderbox when he signalled Hungary's determination to take a seat at the table in any future dismembering of Yugoslavia. Mr Antall stated that the autonomous Hungarian province of Vojvodina in Serbia — home to over 350,000 ethnic Hungarians — was ceded to Yugoslavia, and not Serbia.

The implication was clear, at least to the chauvinist elements of Mr Antall's Hungarian Democratic Forum. If Yugoslavia breaks up, then the lost territories could be up for grabs. There are almost four million ethnic Hungarians living in neighbouring states and they are a potent domestic political factor. The Hungarian national psyche is deeply scarred by the enforced ceding of vast areas to Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia and Romania at the Treaty of Trianon in 1920.

From Adam LeBor
in Budapest

The nationalist card has so far proved an electoral winner. Budapest's view is that the government is responsible for all Hungarians, wherever they live. Mr Antall said earlier this year that in his soul, he considers himself to be the Prime Minister also of the five million people in the Hungarian diaspora. This adds pressure on Mr Antall to note the demand by the Union of Hungarian Slovenes to recognise the independence of the breakaway republics, as has the political party of the ethnic Hungarians living in Romania.

His historical reminder of Trianon showed up the ambiguity of Hungarian policy towards Yugoslavia. On the international stage, Hungary aligns with the EC countries. It calls for a Yugoslavia composed of a peaceful confederation of sovereign republics and claims the redrawing of borders is not on the agenda.

The foreign ministers of Hungary, Austria and Yugoslavia met last Saturday in Budapest for crisis talks. Speaking afterwards, the troika claimed it had not discussed whether to recognise the breakaway republics.

But Hungary's Foreign Minister, Geza Jeszensky, called for special consideration for the rights of national minorities in Yugoslavia. "Our philosophy is that the solution of these problems is European integration," said Mr Baba. "The importance of borders is minimalised, people, thoughts and ideas can move without obstacles. New borders can be the starting points of new conflicts."

In an interview last year with Radio Free Europe Mr Jeszensky expressed concern about the position of Hungarians in the Vojvodina, who were "under very strong pressure". The position of all Hungarian minorities was "of paramount importance. We cannot remain neutral and indifferent to their unfortunately quite frequent neglect and mistreatment."



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