

'Let Slovenes and Croats go' urges Yugoslavia's vice-president

BRANKO KOSTIC, the Yugoslavian vice-president, yesterday called for Slovenia and Croatia to be allowed to secede. Mr Kostic, who represents Montenegro on the eight-member Yugoslav State Presidency and belongs to the Serb 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."

The statement, published by Tanjug, the Yugoslav news agency, was issued as the State Presidency met to discuss the latest EC initiative, aimed at bringing a

peaceful resolution to the crisis.

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.

Mr Kostic frankly 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 role of the Serb-dominated federal forces should be "to protect endangered Serbs" in areas where they form compact minorities in Croatia and Bosnia.

He said it was better to use the Yugoslav army to protect Serbs in Croatia,

than to call up a new, purely Serb army composed of reservists. "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 Yugoslavia starting a third," he said.

Last week, the Serb 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". Their endorsement of the right of

From Marcus Tanner in Belgrade

the "rebel republics" to secede points 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 they can swallow the rest. But army leaders appear committed to maintaining Yugoslavia's present frontiers intact.

Serb militias already have *de facto* control over large chunks of territory in other republics. Since last August, armed bands of Serbs have seized con-

trol over a large strip of southern Croatia, called Krajina, and also control chunks of Bosnia. An unresolved 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, the speaker of the Croat parliament, claimed earlier this week that talks between Serbia and Croatia over boundaries were indeed taking place. But the Yugoslavian President, Stipe Mesic, who is also Croatian, com-

pared 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."

EC officials yesterday confirmed two delegations to Yugoslavia. The first will be a team of civilian and military observers to monitor the fragile ceasefire in Slovenia between the Yugoslav army and the republic's territorial defence forces. They will also visit "crisis regions" in Croatia. The second group will aid the federal authorities in drawing up a new constitution for what is left of Yugoslavia, and suggest economic reforms.