

Villagers await battle for no man's land

Ordinary life has come to a halt in Silas, Croatia, where Serbs prepare for further conflict with Croatian forces, writes **Steve Crawshaw**

On the way into Serbian territory, you see the signs of war: a burnt-out house, dozens of spent cartridges in the middle of the road by a maize field, piled-up sandbags at road junctions. At the entrance to Silas itself, a small group of fighters stands outside the village shop. On the steps are two anti-tank rockets with Yugoslav army markings, and half a dozen rocket-propelled grenades. Ask one of the Serbs if he thinks there will be a war, and he declares: "There's already a war", and laughs.

CAORLE (Reuter) — Grandmasters from Serbia and Croatia have come to blows during an Italian chess tournament. The fight between the Croatian master, Nenad Sulava, and Velibor Zir-

Many Serbs see themselves as taking part in a re-run of history. One man in Silas said: "They shot at us again last night. The Ustashe shoot every night." The "Ustashe" label is a reference to Croatia's fascist puppet regime which slaughtered hundreds of thousands of Serbs during the Second World War. Serbs argue that today's Croatian government is simply a follow-on from the Ustashe. The label game is played by both sides: Croats refer to Serb gunmen with the generic term "Chetniks", referring to the ex-

treme-right Serb nationalist movement, which has seen a revival in recent months.

The Croats claim that the Chetniks are imported troublemakers from Serbia proper. In reality, it is easy to find local enthusiasts in the Serb areas of Croatia for the Chetnik cause, which embraces the idea of a greater Serbia, with much-expanded borders.

Rade, a young gunman, says: "We want the resurrection of Yugoslavia. But, if not, we want to redraw the borders. Slovenia: let them leave if they want. Let who-

ever wants to separate them. Zirkovic was taken to hospital with a cut hand but police brought no charges. The two men had not been scheduled to play each other.

ever wants to, remain . . . we've entered a phase where we don't see . . . any solution. The only way is to change the borders." In other words, Croatia can go, but only if Serb districts become part of the new Serbia. It is not a recipe for a peaceful future.

At present, the village of Silas is "trapped" by the Croats, according to one Serb there. The village — in which Serb slogans and nationalist symbols are painted on the walls — seems to be waiting for something to happen. All ordinary work has stopped, as people gear up for the only thing that concerns them: the conflict with Croatian power. One fierce battle has already taken place: in the nearby village of Tenja at the weekend, seven people were killed in a day-long shoot-out.

Meanwhile, a spirit of lawlessness prevails. This week, Serbs helped themselves at gunpoint to a Dutch journalist's car, which carried Zagreb number plates. There have been several incidents of cars being shot at.

AROUND the village of Silas, in eastern Croatia, the traditional breadbasket of Yugoslavia, the wheat is ready for harvesting. But nobody is sure if they will be able to bring in the harvest. "This is a war," one man in Silas said yesterday, "and nobody seems to know it."

You see the occasional tractor driver, with a machine-gun beside him. But in most respects, there is not even the pretence of continuing with ordinary life.

Silas is in a Serbian-majority area of Croatia, and the people are already on a war footing. They say they are shot at by the Croats every night; the Croats say they are constantly shot at by the Serbs.

To go through from Croatia proper to Silas you effectively pass through enemy lines. After going through a Croat roadblock, there is a mile of no man's land before reaching the Serbs. Only journalists, with their press cards and foreign passports, are allowed to pass from one world into the other, and back again.