

Fierce battles rage in Croatia

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From Marcus Tanner in Belgrade

SERB militants clashed with Croatian police yesterday in several gun battles in villages near the central Croatian town of Petrinja.

"It's a real battle going on," said a Croatian policeman from the village of Donji Cuntic, near Petrinja. The policeman said fighting began after local Serb gunmen surrounded the village police station early in the morning. Reports of the number of dead or wounded in yesterday's clashes could not be confirmed. Late last night it was reported that Croatian militiamen retook four villages from Serbian guerrillas. The Croatian interior minister last week reported that 29 Croatian police had been killed since August last year in clashes between police and Serb militants, who are opposed to Croatia's independence from Yugoslavia.

Civilian casualties are believed to be much higher. In Osijek, in eastern Croatia, more than 100 people were reported killed in clashes between Serbs and Croats in the last three months alone.

The latest violence has made the "ultimatum" issued at the weekend by the Yugoslav presidency, composed of represen-

tatives of the eight constituent parts of the country, seem like a dead letter. It had ordered the disbanding of all irregular armed units, except the federal army and the regular police force, by midnight on 18 July.

The order was immediately countermanded, however, by the President of Yugoslavia, Stipe Mesic, a Croat. Shortly after signing the ultimatum, he said that Croatia would not obey the order if it meant disbanding the republic's paramilitary National Guard.

The daily outbreaks of fresh violence and the deep hatred and suspicion which mark relations between the various Yugoslav republics, will create an almost impossible task for the European Community mission to Yugoslavia, which has been charged with monitoring a ceasefire agreement worked out by the "troika" of European foreign ministers at Brioni.

Slovenia, Croatia and the Yugoslav government ratified the terms of the Brioni agreement at the weekend, paving the way for the EC mission to start its work. Under the terms of the agreement, the EC mission aims to



Croatian villagers take part in a funeral procession for one of the many young men killed in the civil turmoil that has engulfed the breakaway republic Photograph: David Rose

"observe" a ceasefire and the withdrawal to barracks of federal army units, over a three-month period. In turn, Croatia and Slovenia agreed to "freeze" their declarations of independence for those three months.

The mission is expected to concentrate on monitoring events in the breakaway republics of Slovenia and Croatia, although the central Yugoslav republic of Bosnia-Herzegovina has asked to be included.

Some EC leaders in Brussels have confidently described the mission to Yugoslavia as "the hour for Europe". But other diplomats based in Belgrade are openly wondering whether the Community has not been pulled into a potentially disastrous situation, in which Brussels officials will be made to look like self-appointed adjudicators in Yugoslavia's ferocious ethnic disputes.

Far from solving the disputes raging in Yugoslavia, the Commu-

nity may find itself hopelessly split over what is the best way to handle a country which is rapidly heading towards, and not away from, civil war. There is a serious rift between Germany, which wants to recognise Slovene and Croatian independence and France, which supports a united Yugoslavia, mostly out of fear that any independent Slovene and Croat states would be German satellites.

Western diplomats are wondering whether the team of EC ob-

servers is aware that the guarantees of their personal safety while visiting some of the "crisis zones" in Croatia are almost worthless.

Large parts of the republic are under the effective control of local warlords and their militias, who are not responsible to anyone.

A senior Western diplomat said: "Some of these officials could get their heads blown off."

■ THE HAGUE (Reuter) — The leader of the EC mission to Yugoslavia yesterday described

the situation there as precarious and said verbal violence could escalate, bringing the team's work to a halt.

The senior Dutch diplomat Jo van der Valk said: "I don't want to speculate on the outcome, but the situation is precarious and there is a lot of verbal violence."

"We hope it will remain only verbal violence. If not, the situation will change drastically, and there will be no question of continuing the mission," he said.