

Brussels envoy dismays Croats

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David Hearst in Zagreb

THE European Community's observer mission to monitor the ceasefire in Yugoslavia was last night in danger of collapsing, minutes after its head arrived in Zagreb.

The Dutch diplomat, Jo van der Valk, astonished his hosts at a press conference in the Croatian capital by announcing that the fighting taking place between Serbs and Croats in the republic was not part of his brief, and that the accord reached on the Adriatic island of Brioni only concerned military actions in Slovenia.

Mr Van der Valk said: "If the parties to this agreement want to extend it, that's a matter for them. It's not for me to say what the agreement should cover." Monitoring the vicious fighting taking place in eastern Croatia and in Serbian enclaves south of Zagreb, he said, "is not my task".

Sitting beside him, the head of the Croatian group liaising with the EC observers, Branko Salaj, immediately interjected to say that Mr Van der Valk had got it wrong.

"I have to take exception to the ambassador's words. The task of this mission is among other things to see that the Yugoslav army returns to barracks. This is of vital concern to Croatia today," Mr Salaj said.

Vasil Tupurkovski, a member of Yugoslavia's eight-man collective presidency and who has been liaising with the EC mission, said they would now have to negotiate a new agreement to empower the observers to look into events in Croatia.

The fiasco about the role of the EC team is almost certain to lead to a fresh dispute between the warring factions. The presi-

dents of all six Yugoslav republics are due to meet today on Brioni to decide how the country can be ruled during the three-month moratorium on independence moves by the rebel republics, set by the original Brioni pact two weeks ago.

Both Croatia and Slovenia have rejected ultimatums set by the federal presidency last week, which ordered them to disband all armed forces that were not part of the regular police and the federal army, and to allow the Yugoslav state to police its borders.

There was heavy fighting for the third day running yesterday in a Serbian enclave 40 miles south of Zagreb. One member of the Croatian National Guard was killed and his commander seriously injured when Yugoslav army tanks retook two villages over which Croats and Serbs had battled at the weekend.

Milan Brezak, assistant interior minister of Croatia, said the Yugoslav army opened fire early in the morning with tanks, cannon, and heavy machine guns, in a concerted attack on the villages of Kraljevcani and Dragotinci. The Croatian forces retreated to a neighbouring village.

With the EC observers very much in mind, Mr Brezak said that the army officers were "leading their own extra-terrestrial life, which has nothing to do with agreements reached by civilian authorities." The Yugoslav army replied that Croatian forces started the fighting.

The fighting further weakened the prospect of agreement on Brioni today. It also emerged last night that the presidency members from the republic of Montenegro and the Serbian provinces of Kosovo and Vojvodina, were refusing to attend.